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On the opening page of LAST LAP, we usually discuss the end of another great season and how we're all looking forward to a new one. We are indeed looking forward to a new season, but getting over this past one will take a little longer.

For all the thrills of the inaugural 2004 Nextel Cup season, we are left with the lingering pain of having lost 10 racers from the Hendrick team in an airplane crash in October. We use the word "racers" because that's what they were. You don't have to be a driver to be a racer. You don't have to be an engine tuner or crewmember to be a racer. A racer, as we see it, is anyone who has racing in their heart. Racers can be people who work at the shops or tracks, us media types, and you fans. We all truly love racing. The 10 racers on that airplane were family because we are all racers.

In 1993, I was at Bristol when five racers lost their lives in a plane crash on their way to the track. One of them was a driver, in fact a NASCAR champion driver, Alan Kulwicki. We were all stunned and confused and I could see it on everyone's face that day. Later that year, another crash took the life of Davey Allison. Again, we were stunned.

Why, in the middle of a life and death sport such as stock car racing, would we be so affected by these deaths? Because they weren't supposed to happen. Or more accurately, they weren't supposed to happen *that way*. It may sound callous, but we know all too well that death and injuries are a part of racing. Let's face it; racing has always been dangerous and always will be. Yes, we like to think we have reduced those few elements that are capable of killing someone in racing. But reducing them is *not* eliminating them; people still die in racing. In a roundabout way, we are almost used to hearing about car crashes, accidents in the pits, and other at-track fatalities. So when racers die *on their way to the track,* it just defies logic and, in turn, we think illogical thoughts like, "But they weren't even there yet. That doesn't count."

Racers really only take a risk when a driver climbs into a car or when a crewmember goes over the pit wall or when a photographer stands close to the action to get us the ultimate image. People in those positions know the risk. And that's what makes it harder to accept. Those 10 people didn't take a risk; they only went for a plane ride to the track.

We don't need to name the 10 people here. We knew their names before they were in the headlines. They were from *our family* of racers and we hurt deeply for them and their own families. There is nothing anyone can do to bring them back. Yet we know they would not want us to stop racing. That's why we still go out there. They were and still are racers. And so are we.

John Carollo
Associate Editor

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Photo By Jamie Squire/Getty Images

Nextel Cup Champion Kurt Busch with Crew Chief Jimmy Fennig and team owner Jack Roush

Cover:
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Walt Schmidt

First Lap

COMPILED BY JOHN CAROLLO

The Chase For The Talk

In the past, NASCAR fans watched sports like the NFL or NBA to get their minimum daily requirement of trash talk. But times are changing, and now there's plenty of trash right here in our own backyard. Take a whiff ...

Rusty Wallace on Tony Stewart: "I don't know what's wrong with the guy. I like the fellow. He's a good friend. I don't know. He's really screwing up a lot lately. He got me in the back really hard at Bristol. He got me in the back at Martinsville. He caused a huge wreck last week at Talladega and then he runs me right through the fence this time. I'm on the outside right up against the wall and he comes flying up and drives through—knocks the ball joint off, knocks the side off of it. He completely ruins the car. Then he pulls up beside me and starts flipping me off on the restart. I wanted to get out of the car and whip his rear end. The kid needs to calm down a little bit. I don't know what's wrong with him. He's really frustrated for some reason ... I'm going to do a lot better job talking [to Stewart] than NASCAR will. I think I can help him a lot more driver to driver. He's in a ditch right now. He needs some help."

Tommy Baldwin, crew chief for the No. 9 of Kasey Kahne: "That's just Tony Stewart doing what he's been doing all year—driving like a moron, you know? There's no reason to do that



Photo By Craig Jones/Getty Images

Stewart practices his hand signaling technique on Wallace



stuff. He gets away with it all he wants, and all NASCAR does is fine him. He's got plenty of money. The guy needs to sit out a race. I was just talking to Zippy, telling him his driver is a moron. I got off the pit box, he started pushing me, and then the official grabbed me. I don't know what happened after that."

Ray Evernham, owner of the No. 9, on Stewart: "He definitely needs to get suspended, and he should have his ass beat. That's the problem with him. Nobody has ever really grabbed him and given him a good beating. If he doesn't get suspended, maybe I'll do that. I don't know [if he'll get suspended]. But right now he's just crashed a bunch of cars, and he's leading the race. That doesn't say a lot for where we're at right now. I asked [NASCAR] if they're going to do anything about it over and over again. Obviously they're not, because he's still leading the race. Look what it cost this team. It could knock us out of a shot at the top 10. It hurts, and I just can't believe that nothing has been done about it. Does someone have to get hurt? Is that what it's going to take? Does somebody have to get hurt before they do something? ... I'd like to see him give me 10 minutes by myself right now ... We're not going to play that game. If nothing's done, we'll just figure out some other way to handle it. This guy has never had his butt kicked."

Rusty Wallace on his partner, Ryan Newman: "I told him to stay out of my way and I could win the race, but he didn't do it. There's nothing I can do about it. I'll talk a little bit. I want to see what he was thinking. I know what he was thinking. He was trying to get the best finish he could. He thought he was faster than me? I guess that's why he ran through the quarterpanel."

Ryan Newman after the same race: "I don't guess Rusty and I are on speaking terms right now. I know I was underneath him, and I know he came down on me. I wasn't going to give him anything, so he got loose and lost a bunch of spots. Then he came up and hit me after the race. Our car was faster than his at the end. I'm not sure if he's aware of that, but he will be."

So what did NASCAR say about the Wallace-Newman spat? They fined Wallace $10,000 for his little post-race nudge of Newman. Being fined by NASCAR is nothing new to Wallace. Years ago when he was fined, he paid it off with bags of pennies. NASCAR was not amused.

Bottlegate!

In case you didn't notice, there was another big tiff this year and it had to do with which products were displayed in Victory Lane. In the past, ceremonies were sponsored by Gatorade. Recently, Powerade took over Victory Lane, driving smack dab into one of the oldest brand battles in NASCAR. No, not Chevy vs. Ford, but Coke vs. Pepsi! When a Pepsi driver rolled onto Victory Lane, the competing Coke product, Powerade, was displayed on the roof of the winning car. Some Pepsi drivers, like Jeff Gordon, would get out of the car and slap the inflatable blue bottle of Powerade off the car. The Coke people said they were not getting what they paid for in Victory Lane and complained to NASCAR; thus "Bottlegate" was off and running.

It didn't take long before problems escalated. Pepsi drivers Gordon and Jimmie Johnson ignored NASCAR's orders to leave the products alone and when Johnson did it again after the warning, he was fined. (Gee, we wonder who paid that fine?)

A few of the drivers voiced their thoughts on the battle. Rusty Wallace, who just happens to drive a car sponsored by Miller Lite, said, "To me, when you win a race, it's all about victory. It's never crossed my mind to guard this or knock this off or do this or that. Personally, I think you're getting a little cocky when you do things like that. I think it needs to be celebrated. You need to have your crew with you and your family with you and have a big time doing it, instead of worrying about turning it into a commercial event."

Dale Jarrett threw his thoughts into the mix: "This isn't something that's totally new. Obviously, because of the exposure that we have now, it's a little more magnified. Each of us have different sponsors that may conflict with a race sponsor or a Victory Lane sponsor, but you have to make sure and understand that there is room for all of that.

"We've won races that were sponsored by car

manufacturers other than Ford and had all of their stuff in Victory Lane and we made it work," Jarrett added. "I'm a Coca-Cola driver and I've won races sponsored by other brands and we made all of that work. There has to be some respect there and make sure that we aren't pushing these others out because, again, I think we've all come to see how fragile these sponsors can be, and getting these sponsors involved in our sport is very crucial. Once we have them involved, we need to do everything we can to keep them around."



Photo By Robert Leberge/Getty Images

Those Pepsi people are loyal, if nothing else

So what's the key, D.J.? "Patience is very key. I know all of these sponsors put in a lot of money and they want their product to be the only one there, but you have to understand that everybody is doing their part to make this sport what it is and it takes everybody involved. So, yes, patience is key."

Wouldn't it be simpler to move away from the bottle on the roof and the camera would follow?

"They're obviously remembering what they need to do, so they shouldn't have a problem with that. That's exactly the advice that was given by Mike Helton and I'm sure it's been talked about a number of other times besides just at the drivers' meeting. If there is a problem or a conflict there, walk away to another spot. The TV cameras and other cameras are gonna go wherever you go. So if that's not what you want in your picture, go to where that's not in your picture, but let's not disrespect these people that have

put up a lot of money to be a part of our sport."

Ricky Rudd has his views, too, and maybe the key to the problem: "Well, I see both sides to it. It used to not be an issue," Rudd said. "The different products that sat on the car weren't as big as the car. Somewhere I saw someone get out of a car the other day and the bottle, I don't remember what product, was about five feet tall. So it has gotten abused. If you were a Powerade driver and you went into Victory Lane, that was just the way it was for many years. The product was normal size and it was sitting on the roof of the car and nobody said anything. Now all of a sudden the props have gotten bigger and bigger. You can't help but notice them. My opinion of Victory Lane—first of all, it would be a nice place to go visit again. But, short of that, in all the years of winning races, Victory Lane was such a rehearsed media event that my opinion was that the driver, crew, family, the team—they're not allowed to share in the emotion of the moment, and never have been. And I think that is wrong. I know why. There is live television. But you ought to be able to pop a cork on a champagne bottle and spray everybody down. But now they don't even have champagne in Victory Lane anymore. Victory Lane ought to be a time for the family and team to celebrate because you don't get a chance after that. You get marched to the press box. But no one complains. That is just the way it is. But maybe during all the re-evaluation of Victory Lane, maybe there ought to be a thought process that lets these guys have some fun for maybe about five minutes, and then do the TV stuff."

And so it goes ...

Rusty Does 200 Plus At Talladega Without A Plate—And NASCAR Says Cool!

Last year NASCAR arranged a test at Talladega, the fastest track on the circuit, and encouraged Rusty Wallace to exceed 200 mph. They even let him take off the restrictor plate!

This was not a speed test, per se, but rather an experiment conducted by NASCAR and Racing Radios to see how effective communications would be at such speeds.

Wallace, one of only a few remaining drivers who have raced at Talladega without the dreaded restrictor plate, spoke of the experience: "I've always wondered how fast a car would run around Talladega without a plate. Fans have asked me and I didn't know, but with the technology nowadays, a car could run 220 mph. I didn't have any idea a car could run 228 mph down the straightaway. I was running three-quarter throttle through the corners just because it was too hard on the tires. I'd come in and the right front looked funny after two laps. I didn't have the nerve to leg it, knowing the tires were giving me some problems. These tires are made to go 188 mph, not 230. We only ran two or three laps. I can go back and say with the technology nowadays and how smart these crew guys are and the aerodynamics ... We should never race it. Let me preface it. You could never race a car that fast. They're just going too fast. I'd get front-end float coming through the tri-oval. I had to turn the wheel. It was headed toward the wall. The motor was screaming. You're approaching 230 mph and as I got to the corner there was no way you could go through the corner as



fast as you did in the straightaway. I had to roll out of it, and that's the reason you only saw the 220 mph lap. It was fun. It was exciting."

Wow, no racer has turned 220 mph for almost 20 years. What was it like? "For some reason I noticed all the speed in the tri-oval. I noticed I was flying down the back straightaway obviously, but when I went through the tri-oval, that's when I knew I was really smoking. I was holding on to it through the tri-oval. It was trying to fly the nose up to the wall a little bit. We came in and stiffened the rear springs up and laid the spoiler back a little bit. We brought the front fenders out just trying to shift the aero balance to the front. It was a real fun thing. Now I can say I'm the fastest man that ever went around... the fastest stock car in the world, for that matter."

So does that mean you broke Bill Elliott's 212 mph record? "Bill Elliott's record was legal under NASCAR rules at that time. Whether you want to recognize it or not, I know in my heart what it feels like to go 228, and I don't think many people around here know that."



Photo By Donald Miralle/Getty Images

A restricted Wallace at Talladega

First Runs At Lowe's

Lowe's Motor Speedway, located just outside of Charlotte, North Carolina, is thinking of using a new nickname. "The Speedway Of Firsts" seems to be the logical choice, as the track has indeed given the racing world plenty of "firsts." A sampling of creative "firsts" at Lowe's Motor Speedway through the years includes:

- First to host a 600-mile NASCAR stock car event.
- First to sell trackside condominiums.
- First to open a members-only, country club-style facility—The Speedway Club.
- First super speedway to install a permanent lighting system, allowing races to be run at night.
- First to have flyovers, boxing matches, a three-ring circus, a gala, and elephants as pre-race spectacles.
- First to host NASCAR's annual all-star race, home of the special event 19 times in 20 years.
- First to offer custom seating VIP suites.
- First to have a private air-conditioned clubhouse.
- First to have an African-American, former world heavyweight champion, Joe Frazier, sing the National Anthem.
- First to feature racing on a quarter-mile oval inside the super speedway.
- First to offer full-service camping.



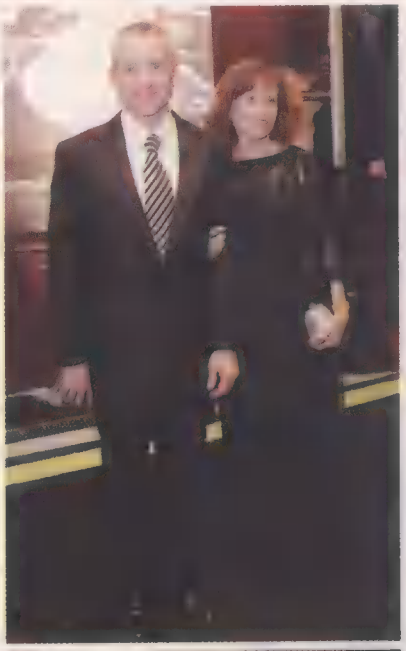
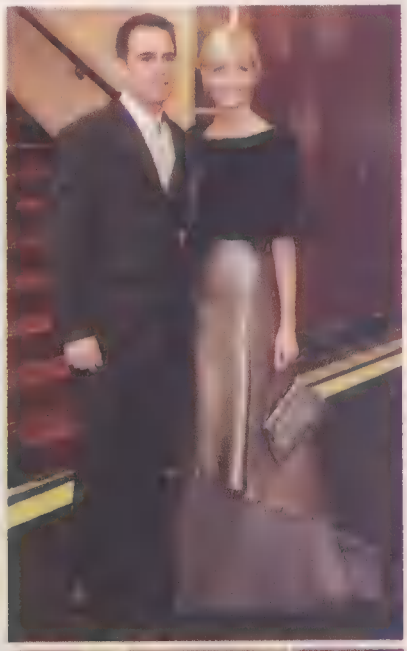
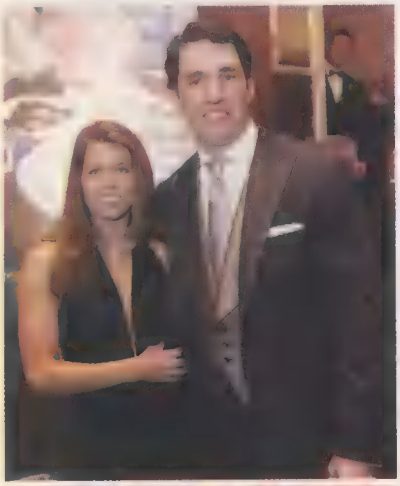
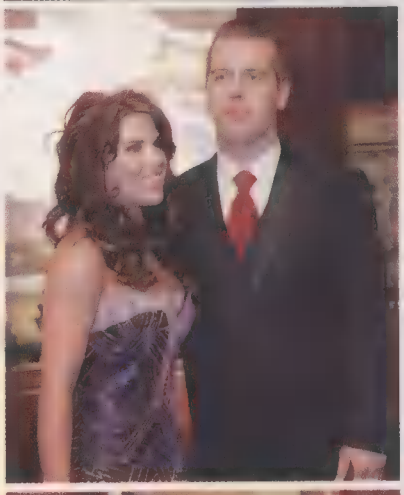
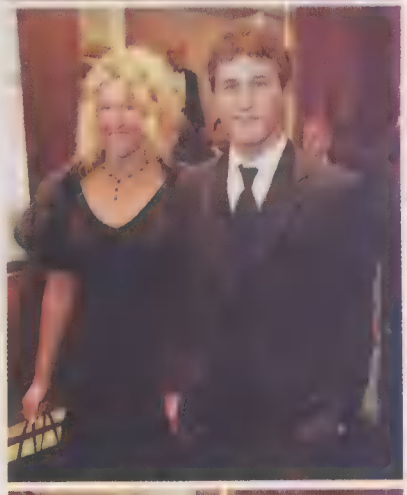
Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

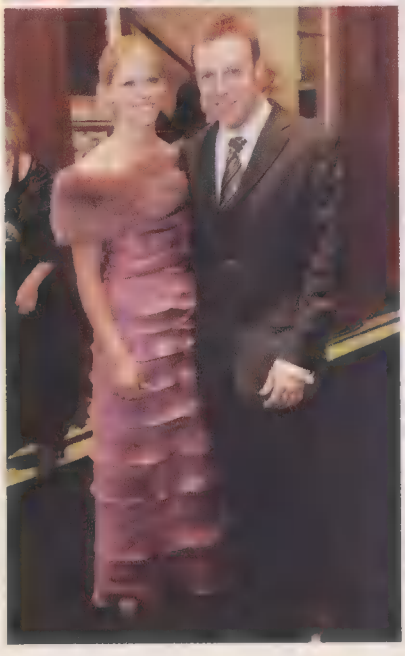
The lowdown on Lowe's

•First track to host Legends Cars, an assembly line-built race car. Now there are over 4,000 Legend Cars in the world, with more than 2,000 races scheduled this year.
•First track to offer prize money based on advancement.
•First to use an inactive landfill as parking. Since 1974, more than 120 acres of parking have been crafted from landfill operations.
•First track with an elevator.
•First track with a sprinkler system for fire prevention.
•First to feature a mobile crash truck with a Jaws of Life.
•First track seeded with "Tifton 328" grass, normally used on the finest golf courses.
•First track with a full performance of the world famous Cirque du Soleil.
•First to reenact an actual battle, the Invasion of Grenada.
•First to do collector-grade tickets for pole qualifying.
•First to host 5,000 firemen at once, after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Five NYC firemen who were part of rescue operations at the World Trade Center became the first allowed to attend honorary functions outside metro New York.
•First track to pay $10,000 purse for what in now the NASCAR Busch Series.
•First to put a lion in the winner's circle.
•First to pay substantially for winning the pole position. The driver earned $10,000 for winning the pole for the 500-mile race in 1974.

... And Introducing The First Ladies

In keeping with our cover theme, we thought we'd offer you a photo montage of our favorite drivers and their dates at the NASCAR Nextel Cup Awards ceremony in December at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City. If you actually know the names of the women in the pictures on the opposite page, consider yourself a NASCAR fan extraordinaire. If you have trouble identifying the racers, you have a problem!




Photos By Jamie Squire/Getty Images



Point-Counterpoint:

NASCAR Chase For The Cup: Good Or Bad?

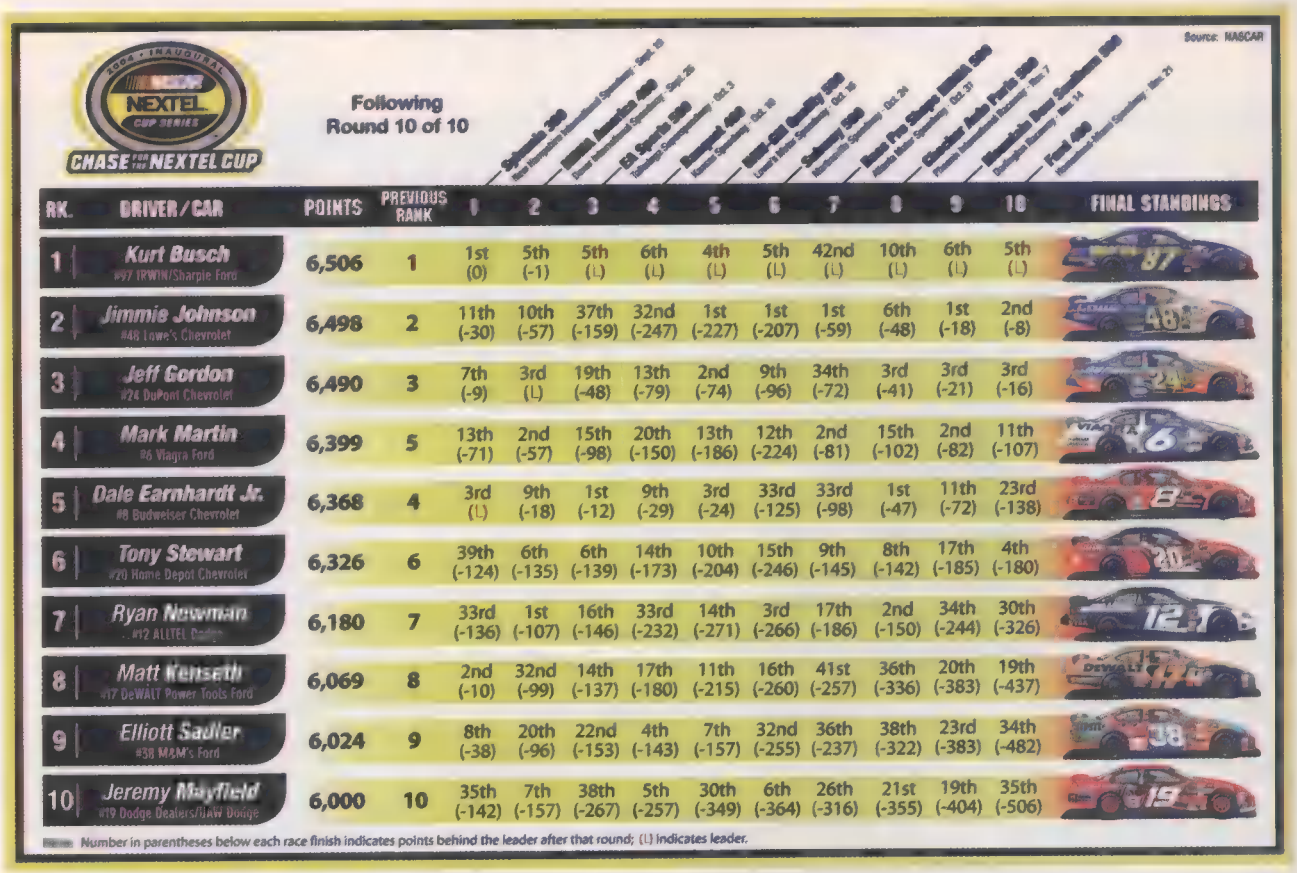
John Carollo vs. Stu Saks

The 2004 season ended up being the closest points race in NASCAR history. But all through the year controversy raged over the introduction of a radically new scoring system dubbed "The Chase For The Nextel Cup." As we approach the second go-round, people are still debating whether or not the new system is good for NASCAR. And we're no different. Two of Last Lap's editors have their own viewpoints on the new deal and they don't exactly match. What follows is a transcript of an argument that's probably very similar to those being played out between NASCAR fans all over the land.

John Carollo: Stu, the only reason the Chase was created was to compete with football on TV during that time of the year. It's purely a TV deal. And within itself, the Chase is just a playoff system, exactly what NASCAR says it is *not*. Racing in NASCAR has always been about a complete and total season of races, where none was more important than another to the drivers' points fund. No two tracks are alike, so all those different types of tracks themselves are what make each race different. And playoff systems by their very nature are always separate of the regular season in a number of ways.

Stu Saks: No, J.C., the idea of the Chase merely separates the top 10 drivers from the ones that could not have made the top 10 mathematically by the last 10 races of the season. Those top 10 guys are already locked in place. It's really not that different.

JC: But by dividing the drivers in



RK.	DRIVER/CAR	POINTS	PREVIOUS RANK	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	FINAL STANDINGS
1	Kurt Busch #97 IRWIN/Sharpie Ford	6,506	1	1st (0)	5th (-1)	5th (L)	6th (L)	4th (L)	5th (L)	42nd (L)	10th (L)	6th (L)	5th (L)	
2	Jimmie Johnson #48 Lowe's Chevrolet	6,498	2	11th (-30)	10th (-57)	37th (-159)	32nd (-247)	1st (-227)	1st (-207)	1st (-59)	6th (-48)	1st (-18)	2nd (-8)	
3	Jeff Gordon #24 DuPont Chevrolet	6,490	3	7th (-9)	3rd (L)	19th (-48)	13th (-79)	2nd (-74)	9th (-96)	34th (-72)	3rd (-41)	3rd (-21)	3rd (-16)	
4	Mark Martin #6 Viagra Ford	6,399	5	13th (-71)	2nd (-57)	15th (-98)	20th (-150)	13th (-186)	12th (-224)	2nd (-81)	15th (-102)	2nd (-82)	11th (-107)	
5	Dale Earnhardt Jr. #8 Budweiser Chevrolet	6,368	4	3rd (L)	9th (-18)	1st (-12)	9th (-29)	3rd (-24)	33rd (-125)	33rd (-98)	1st (-47)	11th (-72)	23rd (-138)	
6	Tony Stewart #20 Home Depot Chevrolet	6,326	6	39th (-124)	6th (-135)	6th (-139)	14th (-173)	10th (-204)	15th (-246)	9th (-145)	8th (-142)	17th (-185)	4th (-180)	
7	Ryan Newman #12 ALLTEL Dodge	6,180	7	33rd (-136)	1st (-107)	16th (-146)	33rd (-232)	14th (-271)	3rd (-266)	17th (-186)	2nd (-150)	34th (-244)	30th (-326)	
8	Matt Kenseth #17 DeWALT Power Tools Ford	6,069	8	2nd (-10)	32nd (-99)	14th (-137)	17th (-180)	11th (-215)	16th (-260)	41st (-257)	36th (-336)	20th (-383)	19th (-437)	
9	Elliott Sadler #38 M&M's Ford	6,024	9	8th (-38)	20th (-96)	22nd (-153)	4th (-143)	7th (-157)	32nd (-255)	36th (-237)	38th (-322)	23rd (-383)	34th (-482)	
10	Jeremy Mayfield #19 Dodge Dealers/UAW Dodge	6,000	10	35th (-142)	7th (-157)	38th (-267)	5th (-257)	30th (-349)	6th (-364)	26th (-316)	21st (-355)	19th (-404)	35th (-506)	

Note: Number in parentheses below each race finish indicates points behind the leader after that round; (L) indicates leader.

and out of the top 10, they are putting less importance and even less media coverage on those who are not in the Chase spotlight. The same holds true for those last 10 races. They are dividing the tracks too. Does that make the Daytona 500 less important than the last race at Homestead, Florida?

SS: Not at all. But those other teams weren't in the top 10 in points anyway, so nothing is really missed or different. And we'll still have those last 10 races, and that won't change.

JC: That's where you're wrong, Stu. When those last 10 races are isolated from the rest, a bunch of things can and most likely will happen. One is that all of those 10 tracks now have a more important race than those that don't. Those tracks can extract a premium for tickets and other services. That's what happens at other playoff venues. Playoff ticket prices are never the same price as regular season. They cost more and sometimes those costs are prohibitive to fans. Just look what a Super Bowl ticket costs. And speaking of the Super Bowl, if the networks can get more money for a commercial during a Chase race from an advertiser where does that money go? Most likely not to any race teams. Let's turn that scenario around. If running an ad is more expensive for a sponsor who is trying to back up their racing programs with TV ads, isn't that counterproductive? Doesn't that cut into their racing program budgets?

SS: What are you, a Communist? That's just free enterprise. What's wrong with having a more exciting end of the season? The level of competition in NASCAR Nextel Cup racing has never been higher. Why not highlight those top drivers in their Chase for the Championship? And why shouldn't NASCAR generate the same interest as other sports? They are competing for the same dollars of the fans and viewers on TV.

JC: Well, you finally got one right. The level of competition has never been higher. And that's why we don't need to



Photo by Sherryl Creekmore/NASCAR

The results of the ongoing debate over the merits of the Chase for the Cup may determine how many Final 10 photos will be taken in the future.

go jacking around the points deal like it was a bad chassis setup. NASCAR has always been different from mainstream sports. Like Hemingway said, only skydiving, bullfighting, and auto racing are true sports; the rest are only games. Why would we want to be like them? Besides, ticket prices for NASCAR races are already too high. We don't need higher-priced Chase tickets.

SS: Tickets are high because the racing venues are bigger and never publicly or governmentally funded, like sports stadiums and parks. Again, the main idea is to highlight the top 10 in their quest to be NASCAR champion.

JC: Bumping them ahead in points is making second-class citizens out of the teams who aren't in the top 10, and there shouldn't be any second-class teams in racing. The top 10 guys have always stood out in the points battle. The top 10 was always the cutoff for sitting at the awards banquet, anyway. There is no need to further distance them from the rest.

SS: The media always focuses on those top 10 guys; there's no difference now. It's more like a formal program that revolves around them.

JC: The media coverage slants toward the Chase people only, and that will ultimately put different values on team sponsorships and advertising. When TV and radio are concentrating on the Chase teams, the ones that aren't in the Chase will lose valuable exposure, the very thing that sells sponsorships. When Joe Nemechek and Ricky Rudd had that cool battle for the win during the Banquet 400, we only saw it because it was for the lead. If that battle had been for 10th, would we have seen it? And try this one on for size: We're now all watching 10 cars instead of 43.

SS: The media always covers the winners. That's what the fans want. With the Chase, they'll also be able to play into the angle of how the Chase and non-Chase drivers interact on the track. People can keep score at home.

JC: The new system puts even more pressure on the teams. If a Chase driver has maybe one or definitely two bad Chase races, he's dead meat on a stick, he's out. We're not playing Survivor here, Stu; this is racing!

SS: You're wrong, J.C. Racing has always been a game of survival. A driver has to survive the race and finish well. It doesn't matter if it's the Chase or not.

JC: And if it puts pressure on all the final year-end finishing positions,

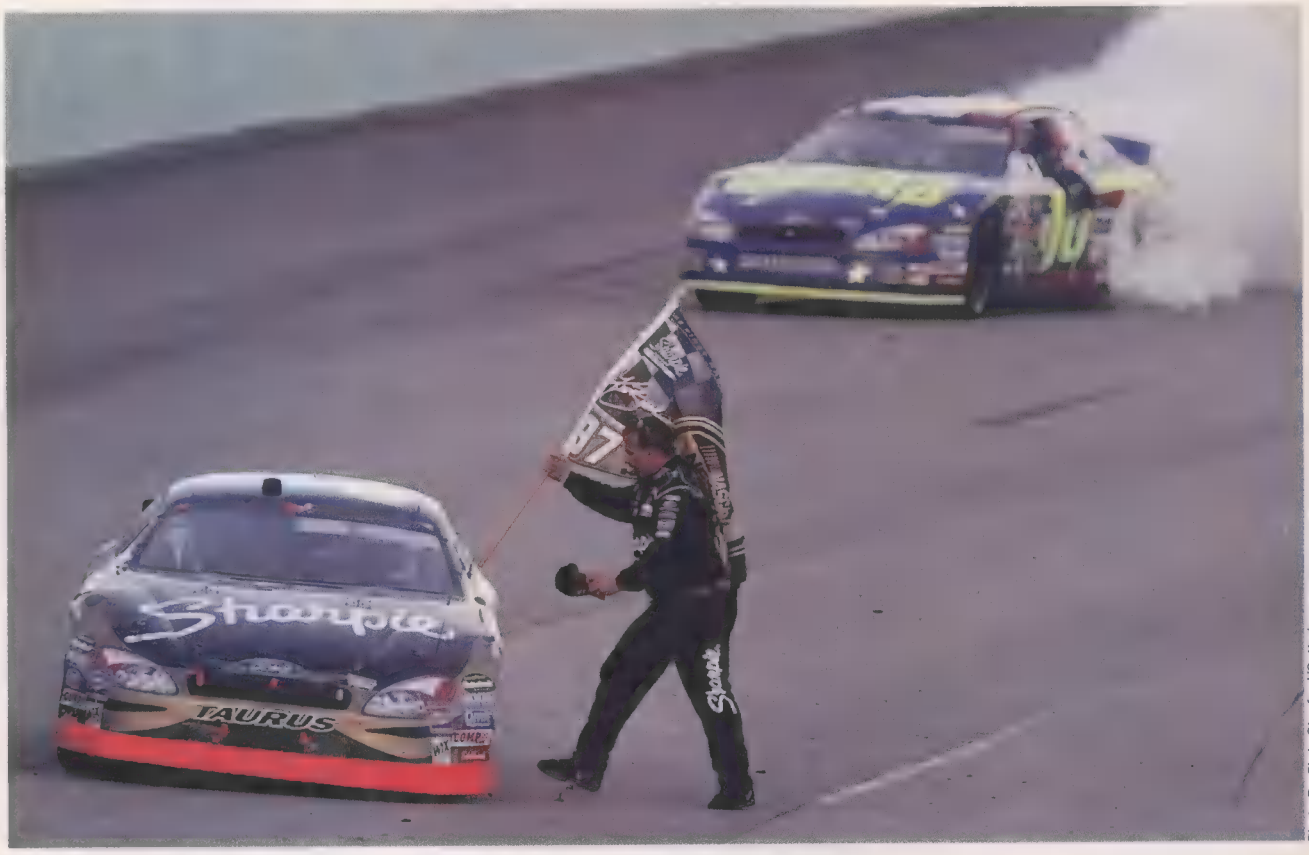


Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

Greg Biffle celebrates his victory in the Ford 400, the last NASCAR event of 2004, while Kurt Busch is declared Nextel Cup champion. It was kind of hard to get excited about Biffle, who wasn't in the Chase.

that will end up affecting the sponsorships. Will a sponsor pay for a 26-race season or a 10-race season?

SS: When they start 43 cars every race, some are going to finish well and some won't—that's racing all over the world. Someone's got to finish last, just like someone's got to win. Besides, almost all sponsorships have performance clauses. There are bonuses for finishing well.

JC: That's my point— once a guy has been eliminated from the top 10 and the Chase, then he'd be like damaged goods to a sponsor. And don't forget, NASCAR had problems filling their 43-car field early in the season because the guys who round out the field had money problems. Money problems are always sponsor problems.

SS: But the fields were always filled, weren't they?

JC: Another thing, Stu, is that sponsor money drives this sport. It's not like stick and ball sports that have multimillion-dollar owners paying their stars. A race team has to have the money first to run up front. Putting a barrier between groups of racers will increase the already large divide between the haves and have-nots equipment-wise. When that happens, the number of winners dwindles and racing gets boring. Then the number of cars goes down. Do you want 20-car fields, like they have in some types of racing? I don't. A driver earns his money all season, not like ball players who negotiate a huge salary even before they play their first game. The fans know that without the sponsors, there will be no racing. That's why they are so loyal to the sponsors' products. And the sponsors know all about that loyalty. That's why they spend millions on us. Race fans are like no other sports fans and racing is like no other sport.



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

If John Carollo had his way and the scoring system had not been changed, Jeff Gordon and Jimmie Johnson would have finished one-two in the standings. Kurt Busch, who doubtlessly supports Stu Saks' stance, would have come in fourth.

SS: That money thing is something that is inherent in racing and all sports. There's always going to be one team that spends more than the others. Look at the New York Yankees. But there's not much that can be done for the regular expenses of racing. NASCAR is always trying to reduce costs. You already know about how they are eliminating Happy Hours and special qualifying parts.

JC: But what about a team that's strong the first part of the season? Kyle Petty said: It's not going to be who was strong the first 26 races. It's who's carrying that momentum. It's kind of like baseball. You can start the season at 2-20 and still end up winning the pennant and going to the World Series. Is that fair? The points system was designed to reward finishes over the entire season, not just the last 10 races when a driver may get a second try at overtaking the points leader. It's like a kid's "do over" on the playground.

SS: That's why they level it all off with only five-point increments at the start of the Chase. So they all have about the same chance, but don't lose their overall points position. In effect, they're redesigning the final 10 races to make them the best possible races for the fans.

JC: That's another major flaw, Stu. If a guy has a huge lead in points on the 26th race, wham! He gets all those points taken away and has to start all over. Tell me that's fair. You think that team's gonna feel like all their work was



Photo By Gavin Lawrence/Getty Images

The classic ending of the Banquet 400 in which Joe Nemechek edged Ricky Rudd by .081 seconds was notable only because the racers battled it out to the end. The Chase tends to take the emphasis from such competition farther back in the pack.

for nothing if they have to give up a healthy points lead and then don't win the Cup? Are they gonna brag that they won the first part of the season?

SS: The Chase made for a really exciting finish this year, didn't it, J.C.? Kurt Busch won by only eight points, the smallest margin ever in all the years of NASCAR racing. It was down to five guys for the last race to the last lap. That's big! That's huge!

JC: The Craftsman Trucks Series didn't have a Chase, and their points battle came down to the last lap of the last race. Do you know that if the old system was in use, Jeff Gordon would have won by 47 points over Jimmie Johnson, and Kurt Busch would have finished fourth in points behind Dale Earnhardt Jr.? Besides, the Chase makes the drivers race more for points than the win, and that makes for a boring race.

SS: That's simply not true, J.C. They always race for points at the end of the season when the big money is on the line.



Photo By Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images

It's doubtful that the Daytona 500 will ever lose its luster, but the new scoring system does place a greater significance on the last 10 races, and thus minimizes the impact of some of the earlier ones.

JC: Yeah, but they never admit it.

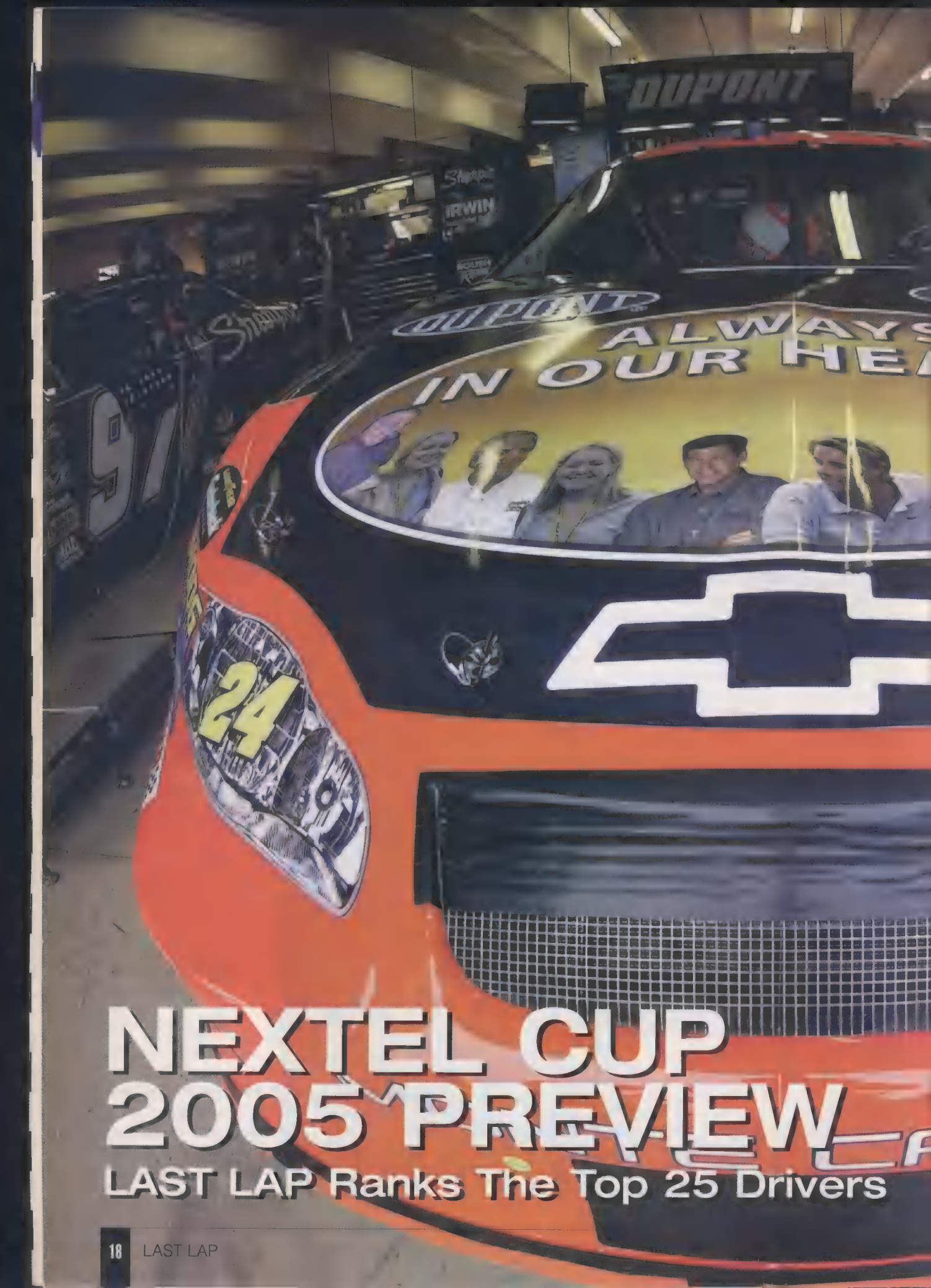
SS: You're just mad because Dale Jr. didn't take the title like you predicted he would.

JC: Stu, I still say it's strictly a TV deal. So what's next, cage matches like in pro wrasslin'? NASCAR wants to be like other sports, and we like NASCAR because it's *not* like other sports. End game.



Photo By Saks

If Lowe's or Home Depot were forced to pay higher advertising costs for Chase races, might that have an impact on their racing budgets?



NEXTEL CUP 2005 PREVIEW

LAST LAP Ranks The Top 25 Drivers



Section Compiled By John Carollo

Here we go again! It's time for our totally unscientific, seat-of-the-pants picks to determine who ends up where on the NASCAR Nextel Cup monkey pile for 2005. And while this year is actually a stable one by NASCAR standards, with no major car or team member changes, the competition is at an all-time high.

We admit we got skunked last year when we picked Dale Earnhardt Jr. to nail down the very first Nextel Cup, but then again, he did have some unusually bad luck at Chase time after leading the way most of the season. And there was no way anyone could have foreseen the steamroller that was Jimmie Johnson, pushing his way through the contenders to finish so well. And what about that down-to-the-last-race battle for the title? NASCAR sure hit a home run with the Chase For The Nextel Cup "playoff system," didn't they? Kurt Busch surely made the most of it, but can he repeat?

A look into our crystal ball reveals the answer to that and many other questions. Read on ...

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

1

JEFF GORDON #24

Dupont Chevy Monte Carlo
Hendrick Motorsports



Photo By Gavin Lawrence/Getty Images

2004 Finish	3
Points	6,490
Winnings	$6,437,660
Wins	5
Top 5	16
Top 10	25
Poles	6

Yeah, we know, everyone boos old Jeffie, but he's shown a remarkable return to his old ways of being fiercely competitive. Did you see what he said when they interviewed him after the second-to-last race last year at Darlington, and how he said it? He was ready to go racing right then and there to settle this Chase thing. It's a rare occasion when Gordon has his game face on *outside* the car and that short interview showed he was ready to go hunting for big game.

We think it's hangin' with his bud, Jimmie Johnson, that's stepping up his game. You know, the old brother type of rivalry and competitiveness thing. Or maybe it's Jeff realizing he'll be one of the new old guys when all the big names pull over this year. Or maybe it's like Dale Jr., moving up to take the point for the team.

In the case of Hendrick Motorsports, that's a pretty big step. With Iceman Terry Labonte scaling back on his races, that does put Gordon in the seniority seat. Or maybe you can call it the final installment of Jeff's maturity kickin' in. Either way, we see it as his time, and with him being "The Franchise," he can call the shots the way he sees fit to drive the #24 bus to the title.

And while the team has suffered a truly devastating and tragic loss *(see page 3)*, that usually results in a team coming together to honor the memory of those lost.

NASCAR has made no major changes to the cars (except Dodge), and that means all his cars stand ready to go back into combat. Add one Gordon, slightly more mature and savvy of the big picture to Hendrick Motorsports, and you get yet another NASCAR champ's trophy to put into the cool Hendrick museum.

Consistency	
Equipment	
Pit Crew	
Team Management	
Come From Behind	



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

2

JIMMIE JOHNSON #48

Lowe's Chevy Monte Carlo
Hendricks Motorsports



Photo By Jamie Squire/Getty Images

2004 Finish	2
Points	6,498
Winnings	$5,692,620
Wins	8
Top 5	20
Top 10	23
Poles	1

Like Dale Earnhardt Jr., Johnson was in the thick of things to the end, but came up short to Kurt Busch. Junior was done in by a motor—a motor mouth, that is. In Johnson's case, a late-season charge in which he won three in a row and four of the last six races, left him with an eight-point deficit when the final checkered flag was waived at the Ford 400.

Johnson got off to a slow start in 2004 and actually found himself out of the top 20 for the first time in two seasons. Had he somehow managed his three-race winning streak early on, it would have changed his whole season. If he can maintain that awesome momentum into this season, he would be unstoppable. Therein lies the rub. That kind of momentum is damn tough to sustain—especially when 35 other guys have the same idea in mind. Momentum can burn out a team, member by member. And it only takes one critical guy to have a bad day to kill all that forward bite.

But Jimmie and crew chief Chad Knaus have learned all of the pieces of a championship puzzle. The question is, can they put them together for a full season instead of playing another game of catch up at the end?

As we said in Jeff Gordon's listing, Jimmie and Jeff have this thing where they feed off of each other, making them run better. When one is having a good day at the track, the other feels compelled to run up there as well. It's kinda like the ladders they sell at Lowe's Home Improvement Centers. Ya keep climbing till you get to the top. Let's just hope their legs don't get sore on their way up.

Consistency	
Equipment	
Pit Crew	
Team Management	
Come From Behind	

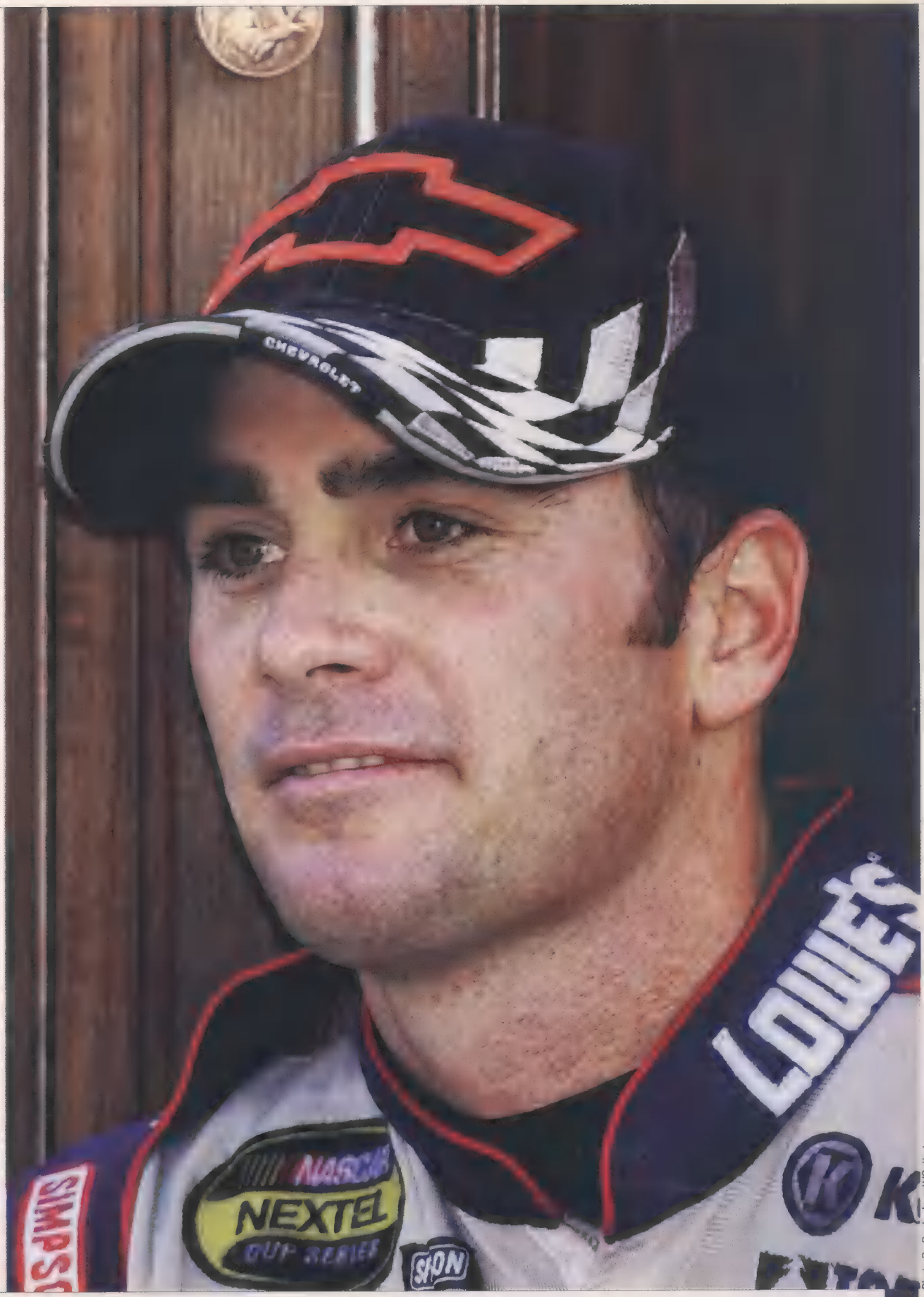


Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

3

DALE EARNHARDT JR. #8

Budweiser Chevy Monte Carlo

Dale Earnhardt Inc.

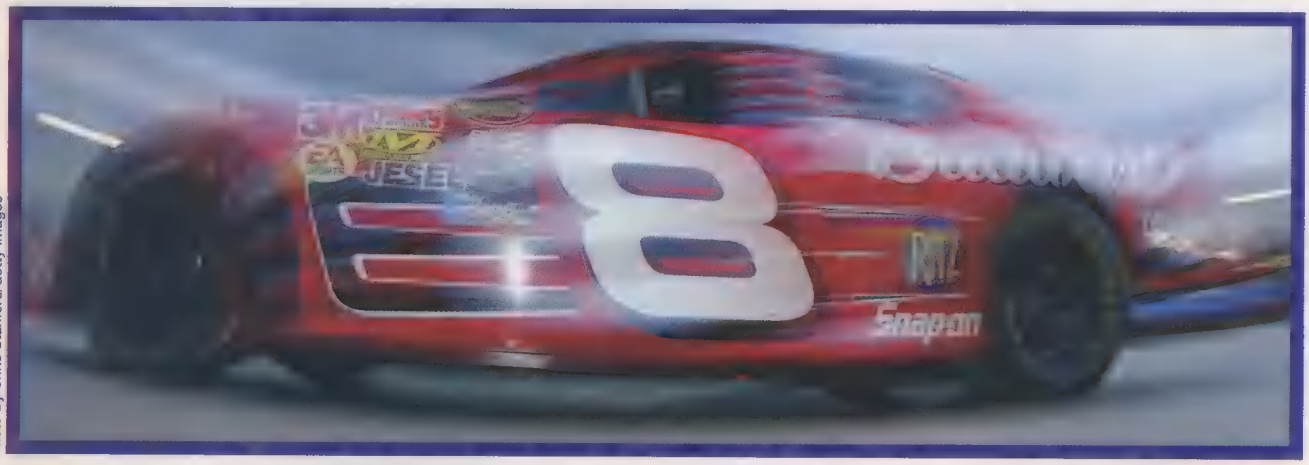


Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

2004 Finish	5
Points	6,368
Winnings	$7,201,380
Wins	6
Top 5	16
Top 10	21
Poles	0

What's that old song lyric, "If I didn't have bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all"? That was Earnhardt Jr. last year. He had the field by a lap most of the season in points, but bad luck in the Chase kept him from leading them all the way home. Of course, it didn't help when NASCAR called him a Potty Mouth and tweezed him 25 points. But, then again, NASCAR does sell a family show to its advertisers and promoters.

We picked Junior to take it all last year because he had completed his "training" on tracks other than the restrictor plate variety and started winning on the intermediate and short tracks. That's the sign of a true champion—being a serious factor on *all* tracks, not just one or two styles. Junior also showed an increase in maturity on (and off) the track. About the only thing he didn't have was the last 10 percent of consistency and some old-fashioned good luck. Until he gets those tiny, but highly important, pieces, he won't be in a position to take home the Cup.

Those two little things can be derailed by the daily business of being the point man of the team. They can be evasive if the team is distracted by a change of personnel. And they can be hard to keep once a team finds them. That's where Junior and DEI are these days. They're a big force in today's race industry, but have not gotten the shove that will put them on top.

A major crew switch within DEI has people buzzing.

Longtime Crew Chief Tony Eury has been moved into a role as director of competition, car chief Tony Eury Jr. has been named crew chief for Michael Waltrip, and Pete Rondeau is the new crew chief for the #8 car.

"There's a lot of things that needed to happen within the company, and people are stubborn about making changes," Junior said.

Maybe he just provided the push they needed.

Consistency	
Equipment	
Pit Crew	
Team Management	
Come From Behind	



Photo by Gavin Lawrence/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

4

RYAN NEWMAN #12

ALLTEL Dodge Charger
Penske Racing South



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

2004 Finish	7
Points	6,180
Winnings	$5,152,670
Wins	2
Top 5	11
Top 10	14
Poles	9

"Rocketman" Ryan certainly proved he was the fastest last year. Unfortunately, the #12 proved that the fastest doesn't always win. There's a definite pattern showing here. Two years ago, Newman won the most races, but had too many DNFs to be in the points hunt. This past year, he didn't win as many, but nabbed the most poles of anyone by a long shot (nine) and stayed within striking distance of the Chase by being better at avoiding the DNF monster. Each year, he and crew chief Matt Borland seem to solve another piece of the puzzle.

But as the only Dodge in the Chase last year, he will have a new nose on his car to develop and that could take some time to sort out. (The Dodges will be the *only* cars with any new changes for '05.) Dodge has changed the name of the cars to Charger, no doubt looking for some of the great success that model had in days past. To look like a different car, they brought out a new nose. Most of the people who have seen the new car use the word "ugly" in their less than kind descriptions. It seems to be flatter than a race car would need, and that could hurt them in an area where they are already weak—the restrictor plate tracks of Daytona and Talladega.

Either way, it will be a piece of hardware they'll have to learn. But with all the Dodge boys sharing their info these days (there is even a pact between Penske and Ray Evernham), it shouldn't be too long before Team Newman can start concentrating on winning.

Consistency	
Equipment	
Pit Crew	
Team Management	
Come From Behind	



Photo By Todd Warshaw/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

5

MARK MARTIN #6

Viagra Ford Taurus
Roush Racing



Photo By Gavin Lawrence/Getty Images

2004 Finish	4
Points	6,399
Winnings	$3,948,500
Wins	1
Top 5	10
Top 10	15
Poles	0

It's still hard to believe Martin is leaving Nextel Cup racing after this season. That would make him a sentimental favorite for the championship, but the same would have to hold true for Terry Labonte and Rusty Wallace too. Among those "old-timers," Martin was the one who best managed to stay at the top of his game last year. And while many could say he is owed a title after finishing second so many times, Martin would most likely be the first to tell you that NASCAR racing never owes anyone a darn thing. Martin has always been a guy who takes what happens and just keeps on racing, putting forth his best. That's what he'll be doing for the last time this year and we figure he'll still have more than enough to make it to fourth in points.

Why not further up the list? Well, the Fords haven't been that strong, even with the new heads they've been using. They tried to speed up the progress of the heads by joining the talented forces of Roush and Robert Yates, but results didn't show too much improvement. If you remember right, the Yates cars of Elliott Sadler and Dale Jarrett didn't exactly set the world on fire last year, so we think it's a Ford thing. Sure, Kurt Busch finished atop the heap, but overall, the points Chase evened everyone out as far as any one brand's performance.

Martin will hang tough. He's been to the NASCAR rodeo more than a few times and knows how to pace himself and his equipment. We also think all the great folks at Roush Racing will make sure he has everything he needs to try to finally go home the true champ that he is.

Consistency	5
Equipment	4
Pit Crew	4
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	5



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

6

RUSTY WALLACE #2

Miller Lite Dodge Charger
Penske South Racing



Photo By Gavin Lawrence/Getty Images

2004 Finish	16
Points	3,960
Winnings	$4,447,300
Wins	1
Top 5	3
Top 10	11
Poles	0

This is one of those from-the-gut analyses. We think that despite a dismal showing over the last two years (14th and 16th, respectively), Wallace is gonna go out with notice. We have nothing to base it on as he, one, hasn't shown as well as his estranged teammate, Ryan Newman, and two, hasn't shown a consistency level that was good enough to get him into the Chase.

Maybe Wallace's apparent decline can be attributed to the new rules with smaller spoilers and softer tires. And maybe it's just wishful thinking about a guy that has been at it all these years (our ideal pick would be to have Rusty, Mark Martin, and Terry Labonte in a torrid three-way joust for the Cup, but we're realistic enough to know that's not likely to happen). Wallace is NASCAR's version of The Rolling Stones, having made more comebacks over the years than any other driver. Though he admittedly hasn't been as successful on a consistent basis as he once was, at least he got over all of us asking him when he was going to kill the losing streak. That was getting old for all of us.

Maybe that's why we rank him fifth—so he could prove us wrong and make his last call a fun ride for all of us. Then he can walk up to everybody and give them a big ol' "in your face!"

Everyone but us, of course.

Consistency	3
Equipment	4
Pit Crew	4
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	3



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

7

KURT BUSCH #97

Sharpie/Irwin Ford Taurus

Roush Racing



Photo By Gavin Lawrence/Getty Images

2004 Finish	1
Points	6,506
Winnings	$4,200,330
Wins	3
Top 5	10
Top 10	21
Poles	1

Remember when he was called "Rubberhead"? Remember when NASCAR put him on Double Secret Probation? Kurt Busch has finally gotten with the program and look at the results! You have to hand it to Jack Roush for hanging tough when Busch was doing his best to look bad. But then again, it never was about the driving, was it? Well, with all that behind him, Busch represented his team and sport well and should have another terrific season. So why are we not forecasting a successful defense of the Nextel Cup? Consistency these days is a rarity not just for Busch, but for any team. Moreover, it appears that the days of a team just flat out dominating are over. It's almost like a team will work its way up the hill and that hill just flushes everyone off for the next season.

But Busch has a lot going for him. He didn't get to where he is by accident. He drove smart and stayed out of trouble. One of his biggest assets is his crew chief, Jimmy Fennig, a man who doesn't really know there is a whole big world outside of racing. That's not a slam, that's just how dedicated he is. That's the kind of guy a driver wants on the other end of the radio. Fennig's been around longer than Busch, and to Kurt's credit, he has finally smartened up and begun to listen.

Consistency	5
Equipment	4
Pit Crew	4
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	4



Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

8

TONY STEWART #20

Home Depot Chevy Monte Carlo

Joe Gibbs Racing



Photo By Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images

2004 Finish	6
Points	6,326
Winnings	$6,221,710
Wins	2
Top 5	10
Top 10	19
Poles	0

We wonder if there is a witch doctor somewhere plying his trade on the likes of Stewart, teammate Bobby Labonte, Matt Kenseth, Dale Jarrett, and any other recent NASCAR Cup Champions who have failed in their attempts to repeat.

In the case of Stewart, we have a guy who is an exceptional talent that can drive the wheels off of anything, and he's looking anything but, on a weekly basis at least. "Mr. Smoke" is probably showing more like steam with these recent results. Sure, a top-10 points finish is fine for most, but not if you have the drive of Stewart. We think it's way too early for Stewart to start phoning his races in (and we know he's not), but we can't help but think that's how he's feeling.

In this case, we think it's a team thing, as Bobby Labonte is experiencing the same frustration. Whatever the cause, JGR has some serious work to do if they want to regain their previous status of not only winning races, but taking home those championships.

In the past, we've seen one or both of the good-looking JGR cars up there on a regular basis. Sometimes they would team up and whip the field together. Last year, they were lucky to get up there a few times each. We wrote last year that they would be working on the problem, and they are. But their results indicate that they haven't found and corrected that problem entirely yet, and that's a shame.

As the number three Chevy team, it's not the equipment. As a former champ, it's not the driver or crew chief. Stewart and CC Greg Zipadelli have, between them, all the pieces of a championship team. So does Labonte. That's not something you lose.

Consistency	3
Equipment	3
Pit Crew	4
Team Management	4
Come From Behind	3



Photo By Darrell Ingham/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

9

KASEY KAHNE #9

Dodge Dealers/UAW Dodge Charger
Evernham Motorsports



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

2004 Finish	13
Points	4,274
Winnings	$4,759,020
Wins	0
Top 5	13
Top 10	14
Poles	4

Kahne's performance out of the box last year was nothing less than astounding. His Rookie of the Year award was a foregone conclusion. But as far as overall points results, he had to bow to the master—consistency—and that's a little tougher. There's no doubt he'll get that first win this year, as we've always believed experience is the best teacher. Perhaps his biggest Achilles heel will be the dreaded sophomore jinx—that is, unless he's been talking to Ryan Newman or Jimmie Johnson about how to get around it.

There's the Evernham problem, where teams only seem to get going in the latter half of the season. That's not good enough in today's NASCAR, where you have to bring your "A" game every week. If Kahne can keep his focus, and if his equipment and coaching is consistent, and if his luck is good, we see him moving up into the top 10 for the Chase. And then, *if* he's in those situations where he's in a position to win, he will.

But we keep coming back to consistency, and that will likely tell the tale for young Kahne. Another question will be how Kasey will adapt to the new rules for qualifying and the demise of Happy Hour practice. Yes, he's been to all the tracks on the circuit and has a foundation, but when you're a new guy and still learning the biz, every lap of practice really helps.

Consistency	🏁🏁
Equipment	🏁🏁🏁
Pit Crew	🏁🏁🏁
Team Management	🏁🏁🏁🏁
Come From Behind	🏁🏁🏁



Photo By Stu Saks

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

10

JAMIE McMURRAY #42

Texaco/Havoline Dodge Charger

Chip Ganassi With Felix Sabates

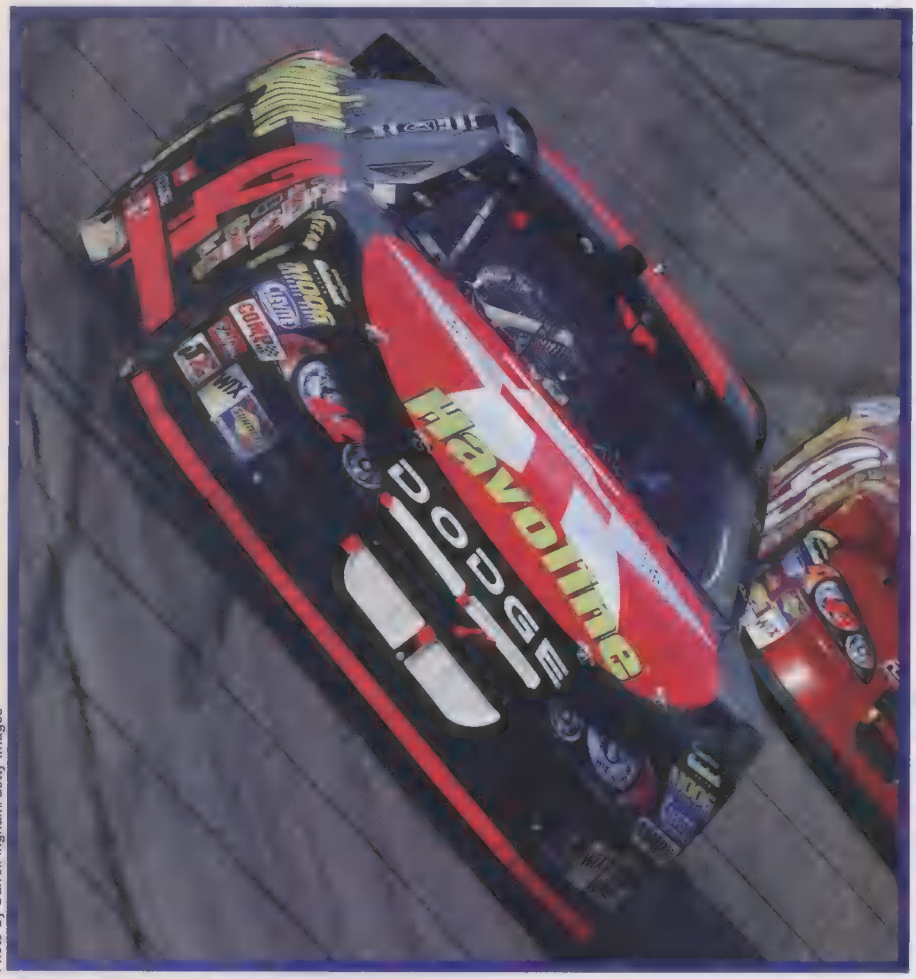


Photo By Darrell Ingham/Getty Images

2004 Finish	11
Points	4,597
Winnings	$3,676,310
Wins	0
Top 5	9
Top 10	23
Poles	0

McMurray earned a million bucks for his 11th-place finish, and surely that put a smile on his face. But finishing 11th in the Chase is like finishing second in a race. Some call it the first loser position. So we figure he's been close enough to the Promised Land to see how life is over there and want to get some for himself. Remember, it wasn't too long ago that Jamie was regarded as NASCAR's phenom. Seeing those 10 Chase guys motor on by, he knows what he wants and what it takes to get it. He just has to get up on the wheel and go after it.

McMurray is in a great position as the new point man for a Chip Ganassi team that includes Sterling Marlin and Casey Mears. And as such, he can command more. Two questions remain: Will he have enough of a baseline to build upon this year and improve? And how will Ganassi get his new-nosed Dodges to run? In the past, they were the big dogs of Dodge with good ol' Sterling leading the way. But it's been a few years now.

A third question: Does this team get everything it can get from its cars? We get the feeling that if McMurray (and Marlin and Mears) could get a little more, they could get better results. Maybe they need to look into doing a little horse-trading, like the Penske and Evernham teams did. It didn't hurt the efforts of Ryan Newman or Kasey Kahne.

Consistency	
Equipment	
Pit Crew	
Team Management	
Come From Behind	



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

11

BOBBY LABONTE #18

Interstate Battery Chevy Monte Carlo

Joe Gibbs Racing



Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

2004 Finish	12
Points	4,277
Winnings	$4,750,540
Wins	0
Top 5	5
Top 10	11
Poles	1

We would never write a carbon copy preview for anyone, but the one for Labonte and teammate Smoke Stewart is as the close we come. We're not trashing anyone here, but this team has fallen off. We know it. They know it. And the others on the track know it. If we knew what to do, we'd tell 'em. If they knew what to do, they'd do it. So we guess it's just a mater of time before they get the handle on what to do to get back to championship form.

From the "what's up with dat?" department, they dumped crew chief Michael "Fatback" McSwain when they were in the top 10. We can only wonder about that, as the slide started not too long after. They'll need a new crew chief that can bring something good to the table and maybe even work well with the Number 20 team. So that's where they're at, and those things always take time to work themselves into results. And even then, there are no guarantees, so we'll all just have to wait and see the results. We certainly don't see this team laying down long with this problem.

So why the difference between our ratings of Labonte and teammate Stewart? We see it as Tony being a kind of all-or-nothing driver and Bobby being a fix-it style of driver. In fact, Labonte has long been a driver to slowly work a car toward the end of the race, fixing it along the way. That's how the point system if designed—to reward those who are consistent and always climbing the list.

Maybe it's a case of them knowing what to do, just not how to do it.

Consistency	
Equipment	
Pit Crew	
Team Management	
Come From Behind	



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

12

MATT KENSETH #17

DeWalt Industrial Tools Ford Taurus

Roush Racing



Photo By Stu Saks

2004 Finish	8
Points	6,069
Winnings	$6,223,890
Wins	2
Top 5	8
Top 10	16
Poles	0

It would be unfair to say this team has dropped the ball since winning the last Winston Cup points championship in 2003. They did make it into the top 10 and the Chase last year. But that's as far as they went, and we wonder how and why they lost their momentum. Keep in mind the style of this team is to nibble away at the competition rather than bite off big chunks. That's precisely what they did to get into the Chase. But maybe it was too little, too late by then. And maybe it was the same bad luck that stopped Jeremy Mayfield in his Chase efforts. Remember that they both got sucker-punched twice early on in the Chase.

But just maybe it all came down to those demons who have steadfastly said no to allowing any repeat Cup titlists since Jeff Gordon performed the feat in '97 and '98.

Of course, there is also Ford vs. Chevy to consider. It's no secret that Chevy had a great year, mostly at the expense of Ford. Will the boys in the engine rooms be burning the midnight oil to find more Ford power? Remember, it was only two years ago that Kenseth led the field with five wins. He has the rare ability to be both subtle and strong-armed. Maybe the Ford hardware will dictate how he works this season. Either way, we don't see him in the Chase again this season.

Consistency	3
Equipment	3
Pit Crew	4
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	3

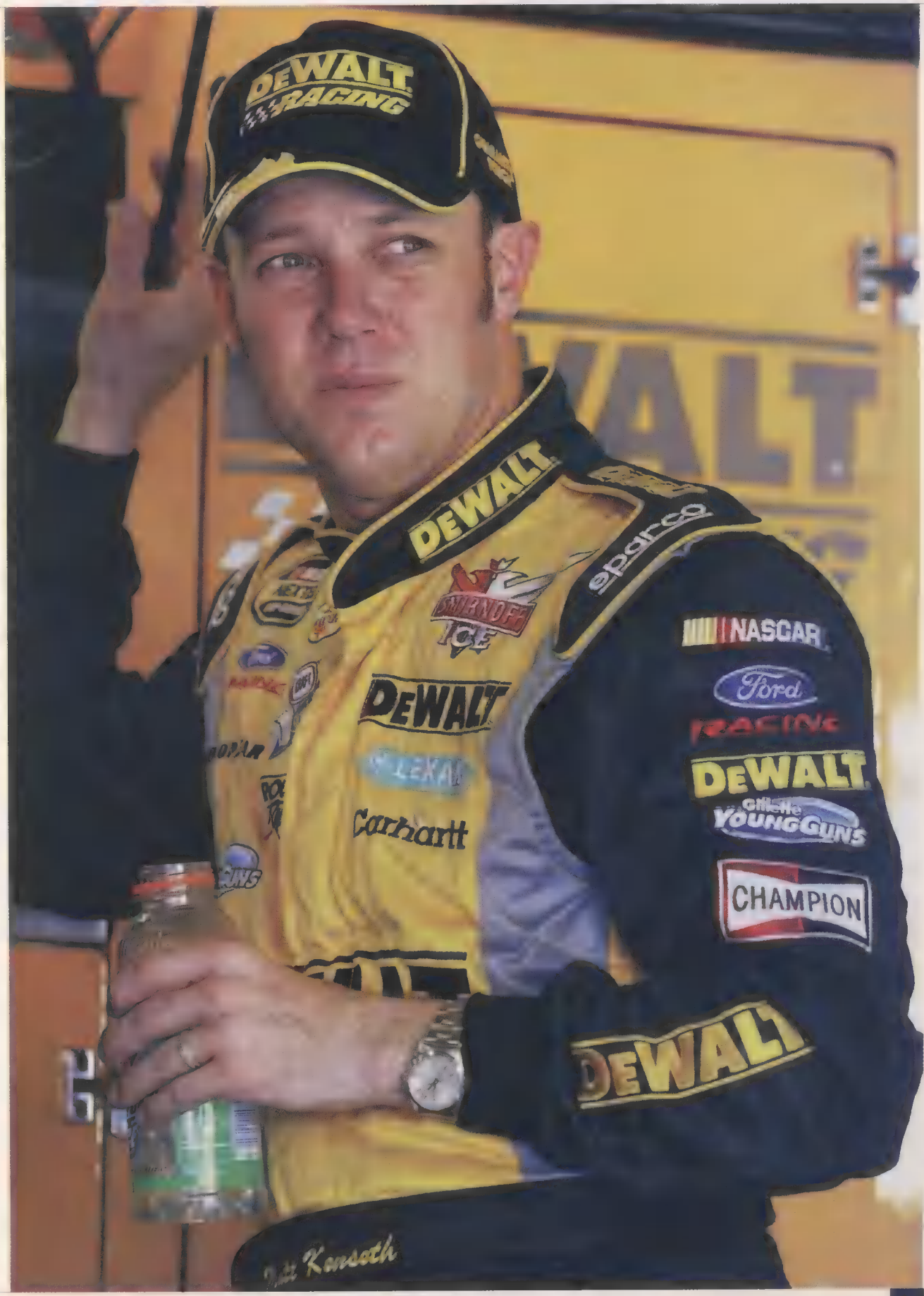


Photo By Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

13

DALE JARRETT #88

UPS Ford Taurus

Robert Yates Racing



Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

2004 Finish	15
Points	4,214
Winnings	$4,539,330
Wins	0
Top 5	6
Top 10	14
Poles	0

It would be very easy to say the brown-and-white No. 88 ran about as well as a truck last year, but we won't take that cheap shot. It wasn't just Jarrett, but the two-car team of Dale and the still up-and-coming Elliott Sadler that ran only so-so. This one is tough to nail down. The team did everything right; Jarrett worked with Sadler, Robert Yates worked with Jack Roush ... but still no great results. They have to be scratching their heads in frustration, as a team that was recently a powerhouse now looks very average.

So what does a team do in that situation? They go back to basics. They make changes, both big and small. They call meetings and get input so that they can examine a variety of ideas. Then they make more changes and try more things. If they are right, better things happen; if not, nothing improves. That's the short and quick of it, and that's basically where all teams that didn't win the Nextel Cup are. Racing is all about fixing things.

It's still too early for Jarrett to seek a rocking chair with his name on it, but seeing the current crop of retirees shuffling off into the sunset tells him that his name has most likely moved onto the "next" list. Does that impact a driver? Yes and no. Jarrett knows his abilities. If he thought that he was the problem, he'd be off the wheel in a flash. So the question remains: What's wrong with this team?

Consistency	3
Equipment	3
Pit Crew	3
Team Management	4
Come From Behind	2



Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

14

JEREMY MAYFIELD #19

Dodge Dealers/UAW Dodge Charger
Evernham Motorports



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

2004 Finish	10
Points	6,000
Winnings	$3,892,570
Wins	1
Top 5	5
Top 10	13
Poles	2

When we saw Mayfield get his bearings in 2003 and start winning again, we assumed the bad times were behind for Evernham and Company. But they weren't able to carry that hard-fought momentum into 2004.

Sure, Mayfield was among the Elite 10 who comprised the Chase. But the team was never able to get to that next level. What is needed to be a major player these days is to be up there in points, threaten to win on a regular basis, and win one now and then. (Mayfield's only win came on September 11, in the Chevy Rock and Roll 400.)

Mayfield's season may have been slightly impeded by the addition of Kasey Kahne to the team. When a new guy gets thrown into the mix, be it a rookie or just a different driver, priorities change and much of the team's attention is diverted to the driver who needs it most. We think that now that Kasey is a little more seasoned, the team can pay equal attention to the needs of both drivers, and that bodes well for Mayfield in 2005.

Consistency	2
Equipment	3
Pit Crew	4
Team Management	4
Come From Behind	3



Photo By Darrell Ingham/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

15

JEFF BURTON #31

Cingular Wireless Chevy Monte Carlo

Richard Childress Racing

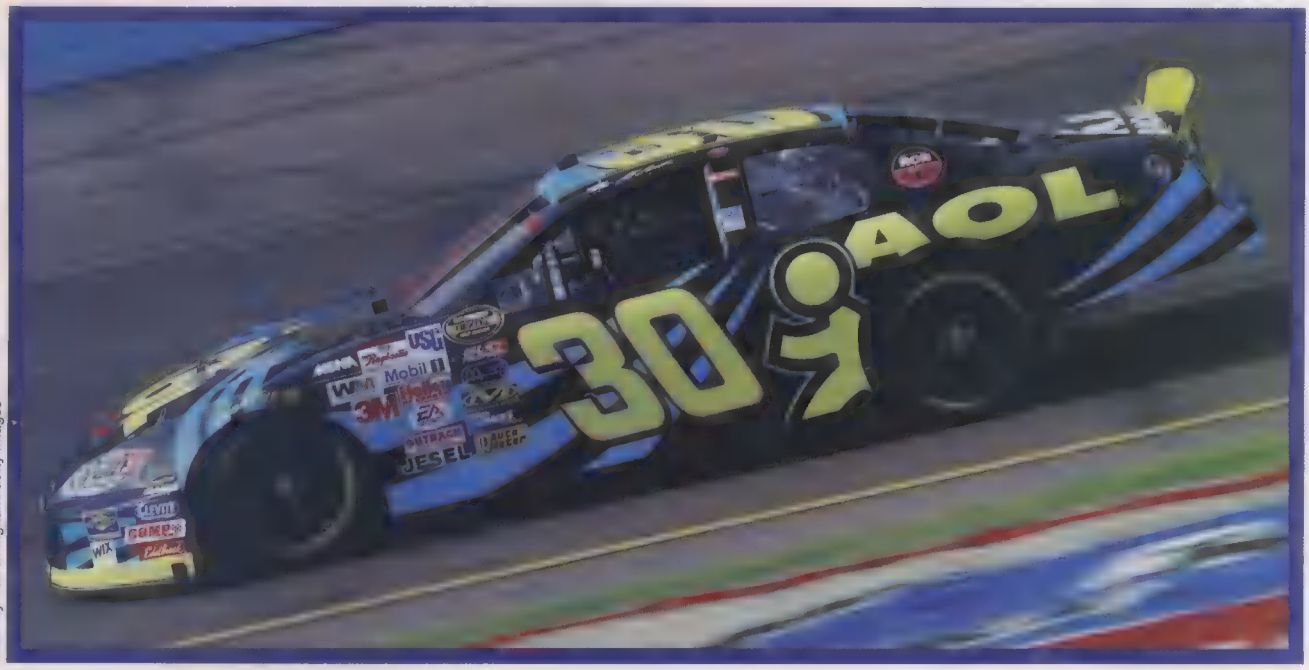


Photo By Darrell Ingham/Getty Images

2004 Finish	18
Points	3,902
Winnings	$3,695,070
Wins	0
Top 5	2
Top 10	6
Poles	0

This one requires a little back story. Burton started out the 2004 season with Roush Racing in the #99 car, but without a sponsor. The team rallied on, but let's face it, without a corporate name on the quarters, it's only a matter of time before the wheels fall off of a team. Burton left Roush and ended up in the musical chair that was the AOL #30 of RCR. Jeff did well, finishing 18th, and that's why he's in this car for '05. Well, that and the fact that the former #31 driver, Robbie Gordon, wasn't picked up for renewal and that car needed a good driver to keep the sponsor in the sport. (Remember, with a wireless phone company as a series sponsor, those already in the sport are grandfathered in. No new ones can come in, and if any of the old ones leave, they can't come back.)

Now that Burton's been given a vote of confidence by RCR with the new ride and team, Jeff can get back to doing what he's good at, winning races. In his tenure with the #99, he was strong when the equipment was there. Well, the #31 car has been one of the most consistent of the RCR cars over the years and RCR equipment is certainly top shelf, so we see Burton making a steady climb toward the top 10.

Consistency	3
Equipment	4
Pit Crew	3
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	3



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

16

GREG BIFFLE #16

National Guard/Subway Ford Taurus

Roush Racing



Photo By Robert Leberge/Getty Images

2004 Finish	17
Points	3,902
Winnings	$3,583,340
Wins	2
Top 5	4
Top 10	8
Poles	1

We're waiting for Greg. And we think Greg is waiting too. We're waiting for Greg to get the rest of his transition in both experience and equipment upgrades finished so he can take off, much like teammate Matt Kenseth did a few years ago.

Biffle is a smooth driver who can get a lot out of a car without using up all the good in it. He was a factor enough times last year to see that when he's got all his ducks in a row, he can really fly. Ultimately, how far he goes in 2005 depends on something that is beyond his control: team resources.

With Mark Martin in his final title attempt and Kurt Busch trying to repeat his strong performance of '04, who gets what equipment and any special attention will be a factor at Roush. Among the three, it's hard to imagine Biffle getting any preferential treatment.

The size of the entire team amazes us. As the biggest Ford team in NASCAR, there has to be certain limitations. The question has always been, are there enough assets to run that many cars at the same time without stretching or exceeding that limit? In the past we've seen one or two Roush cars be strong for a season or two. But the two cars that were in the Chase (97 and 17) were not as strong as Roush cars have been in the past. Is it the engines? Is it the sheer number of cars, parts, and people? This paragraph pertains to the team as a whole rather than just to Greg Biffle. But that impacts Biffle as directly as it does Martin, Busch, Kenseth, and the new guy, Carl Edwards. The question is: Is too big too much for Roush?

Consistency	3
Equipment	4
Pit Crew	3
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	3



Photo By Darrell Ingham/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

17

RICKY RUDD #21

Motorcraft Quality Parts Ford Taurus

Wood Brothers



Photo By Stu Saks

2004 Finish	24
Points	3,615
Winnings	$3,717,100
Wins	0
Top 5	1
Top 10	3
Poles	1

We admit we believed that this historically significant team was on the verge of returning to their illustrious heyday. It had all the ingredients, with Rudd coming aboard for the 2003 season. We actually thought they'd be a factor in point standings the last two seasons. Last year, the Wood Brothers brought in Rudd's old winning crew chief Michael "Fatback" McSwain and some of Rudd's previous crew. They even started changing out their cars. There were times when the #21 actually looked like it did in the old days (maybe it was the cool retro paint job!). But the changes were late in the season and didn't prevent them from a dismal 24th-place finish.

But, based on the momentum they rode into the finish of the 2004 season, we see much better things for '05. They might just have the opportunity to kick and gouge their way back into the top 20. And—dare we say it?—win a few races. "Iron Man Ricky" didn't get on the NASCAR retirement bus this year, so we figure he has some inside info on how this team will run in '05. We think he's still up for adding some wins to that long Wood Brothers list and maybe a serious run or two for the title once they all get going again. The Brothers are up for it and so is Fatback, so wouldn't it be something if they zoomed up in the standings and made the Chase? Can you tell we're suckers for a happy ending?

Consistency	3
Equipment	3
Pit Crew	4
Team Management	4
Come From Behind	3

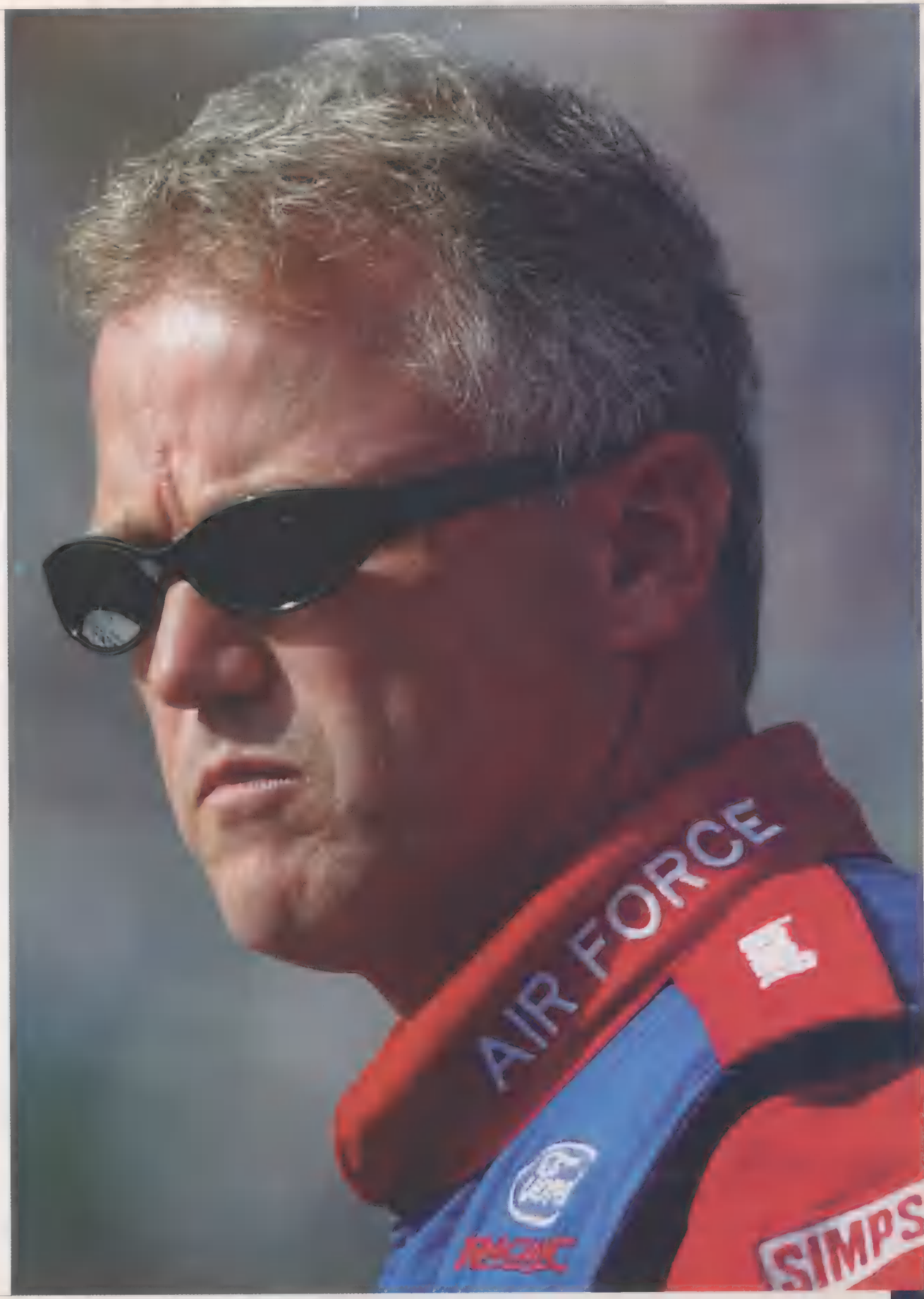


Photo By Darrell Ingham/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

18

KEVIN HARVICK #29

GM Goodwrench Chevy Monte Carlo
Richard Childress Racing

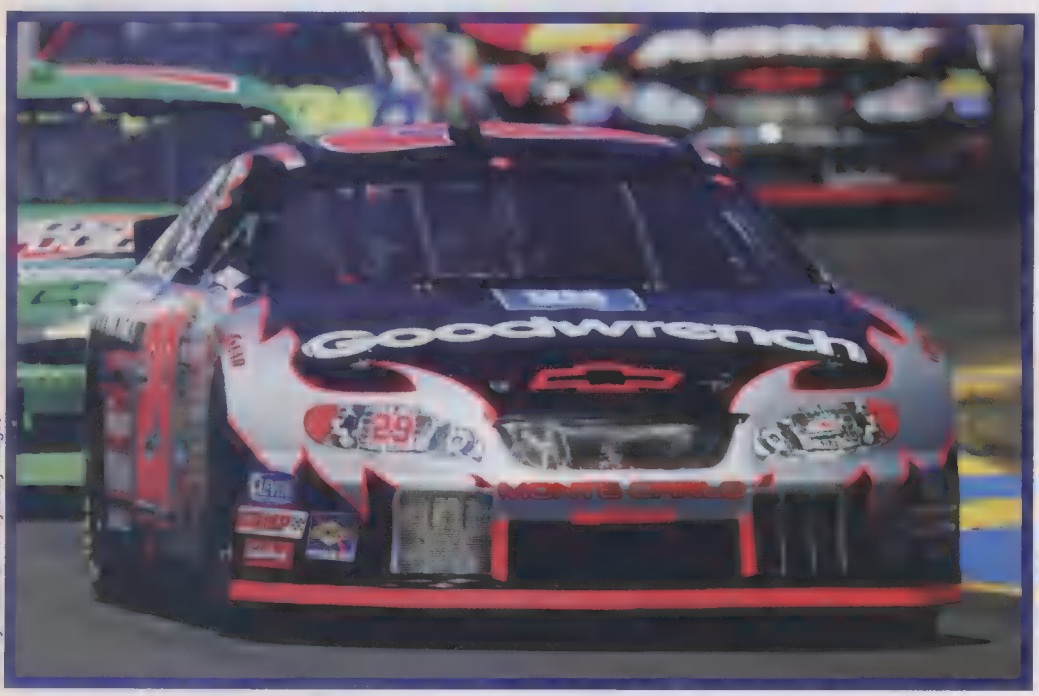


Photo By Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images

2004 Finish	14
Points	4,228
Winnings	$4,730,010
Wins	0
Top 5	5
Top 10	14
Poles	0

A few years ago we used the phrase "Where's Waldo" to describe how Harvick had fallen off the radar. He kept his face in the place by winning a few races, but after this past year, we're looking for that red-striped hat again.

Here's a guy that we know can win. He's in a car that can win. We know that too. With him being the big dog for RCR, we figure his team should be wanting for nothing. So what's up with "Happy"? Heck, we don't know either. We keep worrying that Richard Childress will go on one his famous midseason hunting trips, come back with a new game plan, and cut Happy loose. But would that be fair? Is it Harvick? Or is it the team? And how does one actually determine who is really to blame? This truly is a tough one.

Imagine the other parts of this puzzle. How is Chevy taking this? How is GM Goodwrench handling it? After all, they got downright spoiled when that car was all black and adorned with the number three. It's a real mystery. The team has not changed adversely; they've grown with the times like any other. They had no major personnel changes until they dropped Robby Gordon for this year. They haven't had a new car to sort out when the other brands didn't. Pretty much any question you might ask won't have the key in the answer. But yet, they are definitely not the team they used to be.

We were burned last year by picking Harvick for second place. We won't make the same mistake this year.

Consistency	3
Equipment	4
Pit Crew	3
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	3

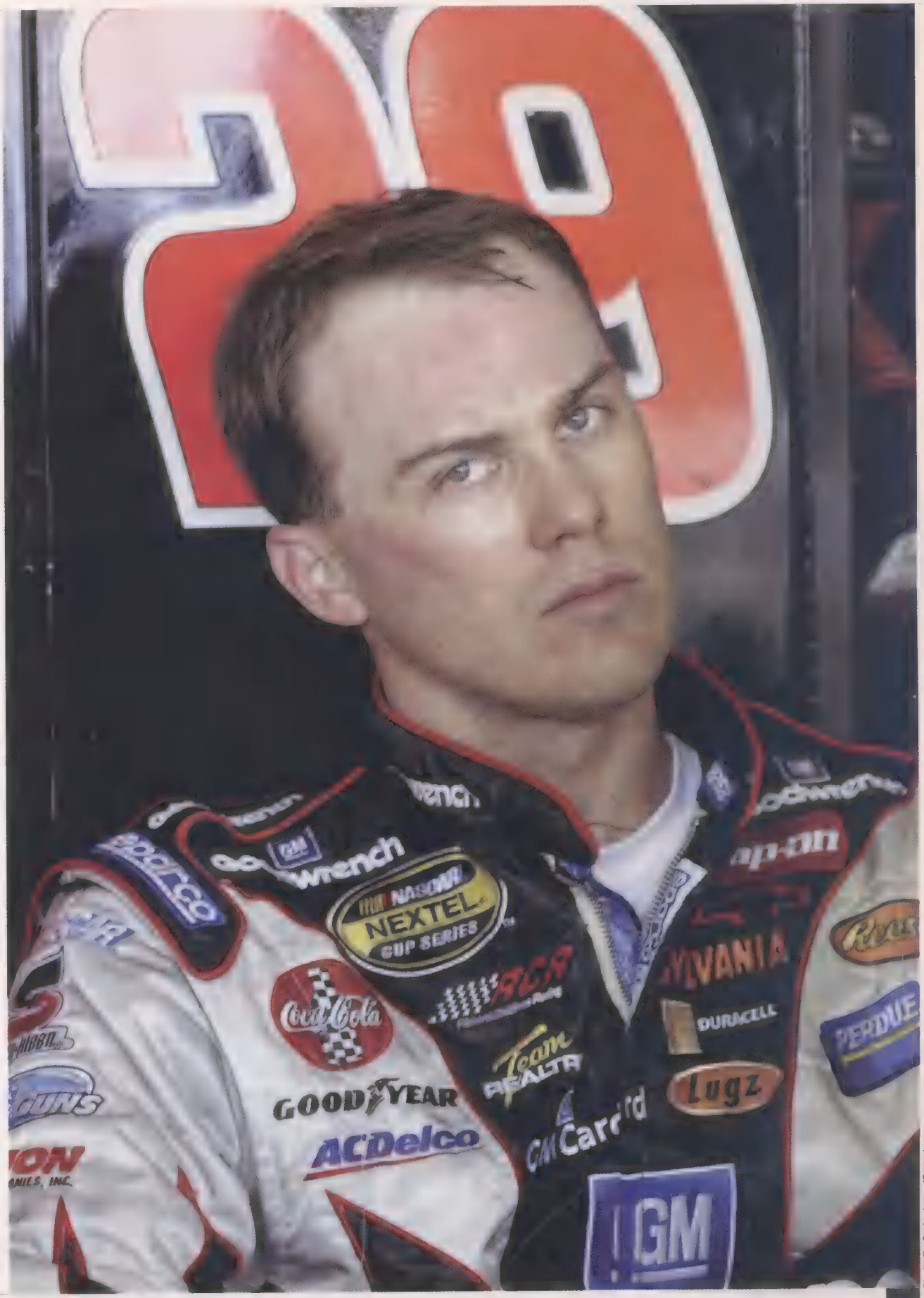


Photo By Craig Jones/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

19

JOE NEMECHEK #01

U.S. Army Chevy Monte Carlo

MB2 Motorsports



Photo By Darrell Ingham/Getty Images

2004 Finish	19
Points	3,878
Winnings	$3,872,410
Wins	1
Top 5	3
Top 10	9
Poles	2

This team has finally become a contender. Not a Jeff Gordon or Dale Earnhardt Jr. contender, but that certainly isn't out of the question. What's key here is that they have a couple of wins under their belts the last two years. Yes, poles are one thing and leading races is another. But winning is the big separator. With the wins comes big points, momentum, and the absolute joy of knowing you're among the big boys. That really pumps up a team from the owner and driver down to the kid who sweeps the floor of the shop. Speaking of owners, Nelson Bowers is a cool guy, so it's great to finally see this team make it to preferred parking in Victory Lane. Ditto for Nemechek, an all-around nice guy.

The team has undergone a number of serious changes over the past two years that most likely have had a negative effect on their progress. First, they had to find a replacement driver when Jerry Nadeau got hurt (he was still healing as of press time). Then their team car had Scott Riggs replace Johnny Benson. But they hung in there and have started their tough climb back. They concentrated on Nemechek and it clearly paid off.

Nemechek has the experience and been around long enough to realize the opportunity that he has. The rest is doing donuts when you win. We even hear they are looking to expand their operation to three cars soon. Hope that doesn't slow them down. We like it when there's a different face in Victory Lane now and then.

Consistency	3
Equipment	4
Pit Crew	3
Team Management	4
Come From Behind	3

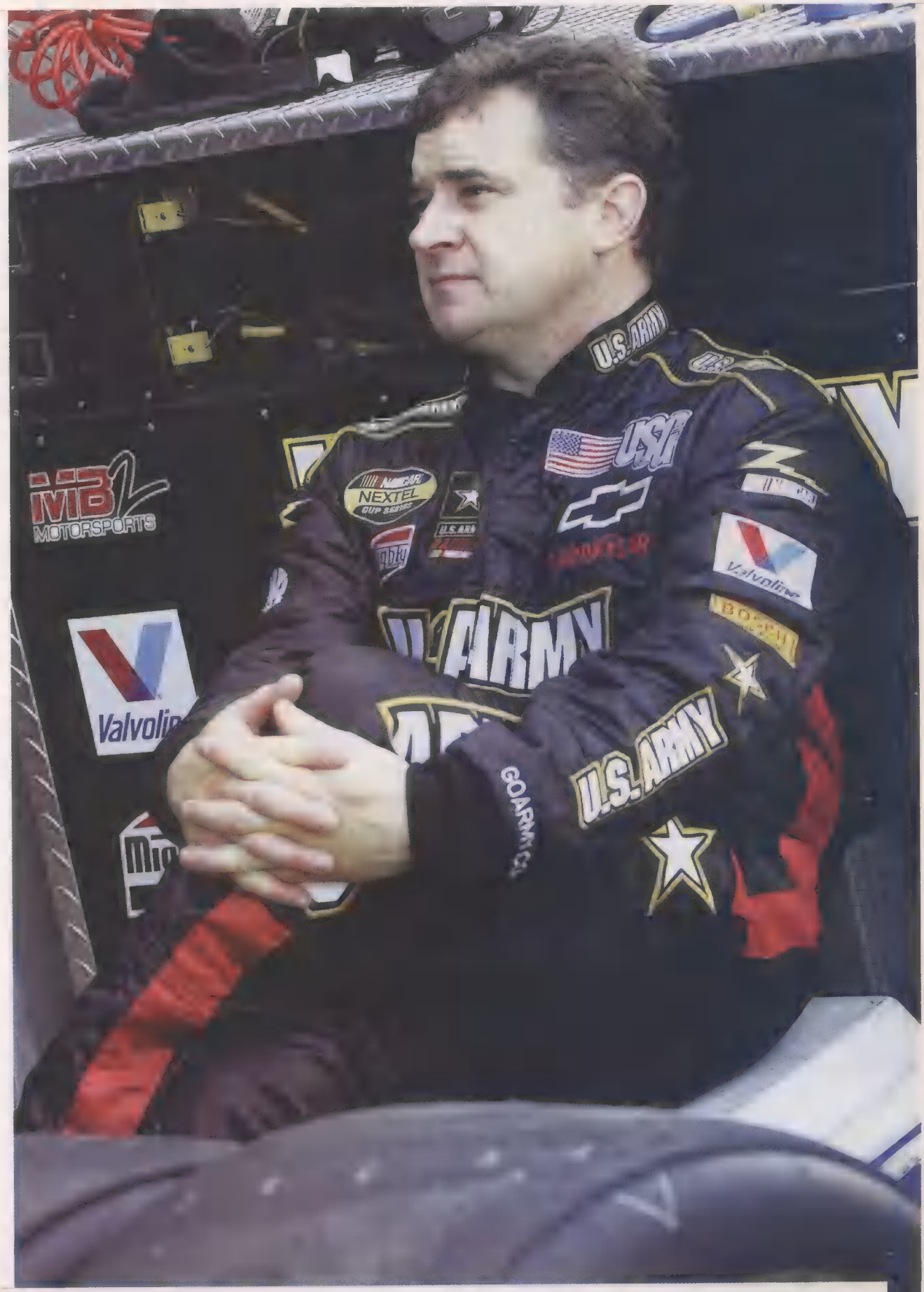


Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

20

MICHAEL WALTRIP #15

NAPA Auto Parts Chevy Monte Carlo

Dale Earnhardt Inc.



Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

2004 Finish	20
Points	3,878
Winnings	$4,245,690
Wins	0
Top 5	2
Top 10	9
Poles	0

Mikey is on the hot seat again. A few years ago, Waltrip was close to getting fired from DEI, but was ultimately renewed. Now, they've already told him that he won't be with them in 2006 so his entire 2005 season will be a virtual audition for his next ride. Does that sound a tad harsh? No, that's how things are done in the NASCAR in 2005. There's more pressure than ever for drivers, crew chiefs, and engine-builders. That's because there's more competition than ever—competition for wins, competition to get your sponsor a great return on his advertising dollar, and competition to keep your darn job. If all this sounds familiar, it's really just life in general, isn't it?

One might ask, what's the difference between Waltrip and Dale Earnhardt Jr.? Junior has never taken home the Cup. Well, for starters there's that last name. But even if Junior didn't carry the Earnhardt name, he's won or been in position to win on a consistent basis for a long time. When both cars were winning, things were cool. But the #15 was missing from Victory Lane ceremonies all year, and barely snuck in to the top 20. The #8 was in the hunt all year.

DEI is one of those few teams that seem to have everything they need to be and stay a top team, regardless of whose name is on the roof of the car. That's likely what they believe and that's why they can't see Waltrip as not being up there with the Bud car. In Mikey's defense, he has had a few good runs this year—obviously not enough for DEI management, but a few nevertheless. Crew chief Richard "Slugger" Labbe was removed from his team and moved on to Evernham. Waltrip's new CC is Tony Eury Jr. While the chemistry might work better for Waltrip, breaking in a new driver to a crew chief or vice versa, takes time. We'll see if DEI really wants to help Mikey out or help him out the door.

Consistency	2
Equipment	3
Pit Crew	4
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	2

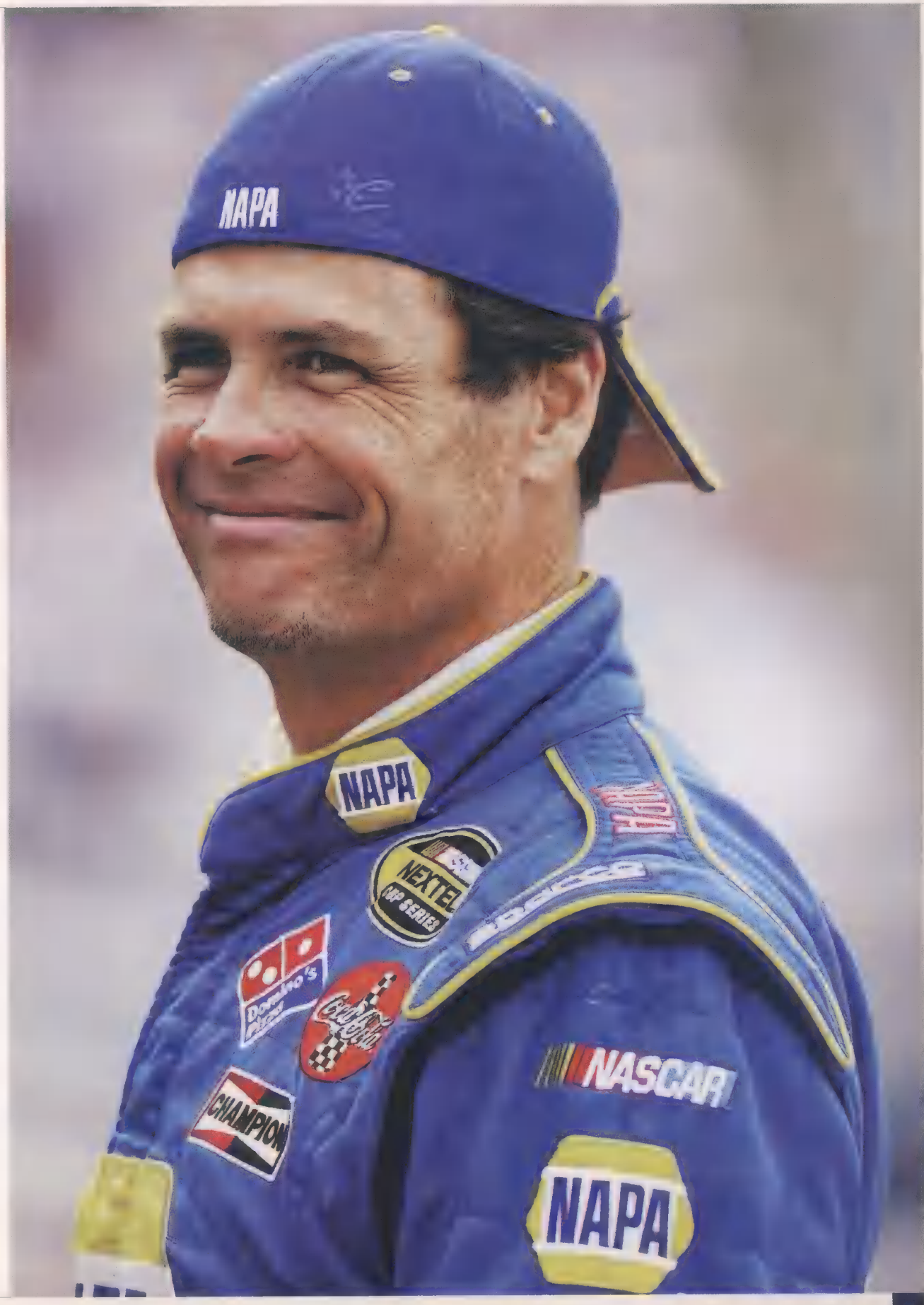


Photo By Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

21

STERLING MARLIN #40

Coors Light Dodge Charger

Chip Ganassi With Felix Sabates



Photo By Darrell Ingham/Getty Images

2004 Finish	21
Points	3,857
Winnings	$4,117,750
Wins	0
Top 5	3
Top 10	7
Poles	0

It was only 2002 when Marlin was the big dog, leading in points most of the year before being benched by injuries. The way it's been going since then, he can't help but wonder if he's been jinxed. Then there's retirement. Seeing the guys he came in with take their last lap may be playing on his mind. He's up there close to them, but not exactly filing for NASCAR Social Security. Rest assured Marlin has some miles left. Rest assured he still has the drive that he always had. Heck, he's been beaten worse than this in his NASCAR career, and he's always managed to come back.

Like his two teammates, Jamie McMurray and Casey Mears, we think he's waiting for his team to regain their edge. If you put all three cars under the microscope, you see they are all not up to their usual snuff. That usually indicates a team problem rather than a driver problem. That is also a dominant theme in NASCAR today: teams falling off and others taking their spots. We figure Marlin knows this and is just waiting it out until the cycle comes back to him and his team.

In the meantime, he'll keep digging and be there when he can. That's what he has—experience. That means when the team starts moving back into attack mode, ol' Sterling will be flying point and with plenty to prove. Then there's Chip Ganassi. How long do you think he's gonna suffer through this? He's an owner who has won championships. He's used to winning and he didn't come into NASCAR to be an also-ran. He joined the team with Marlin and he wants his boy to win.

Consistency	🏁🏁🏁
Equipment	🏁🏁🏁
Pit Crew	🏁🏁🏁
Team Management	🏁🏁🏁
Come From Behind	🏁🏁



Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

22

DAVE BLANEY #07

Jack Daniel's Chevy Monte Carlo

Richard Childress Racing

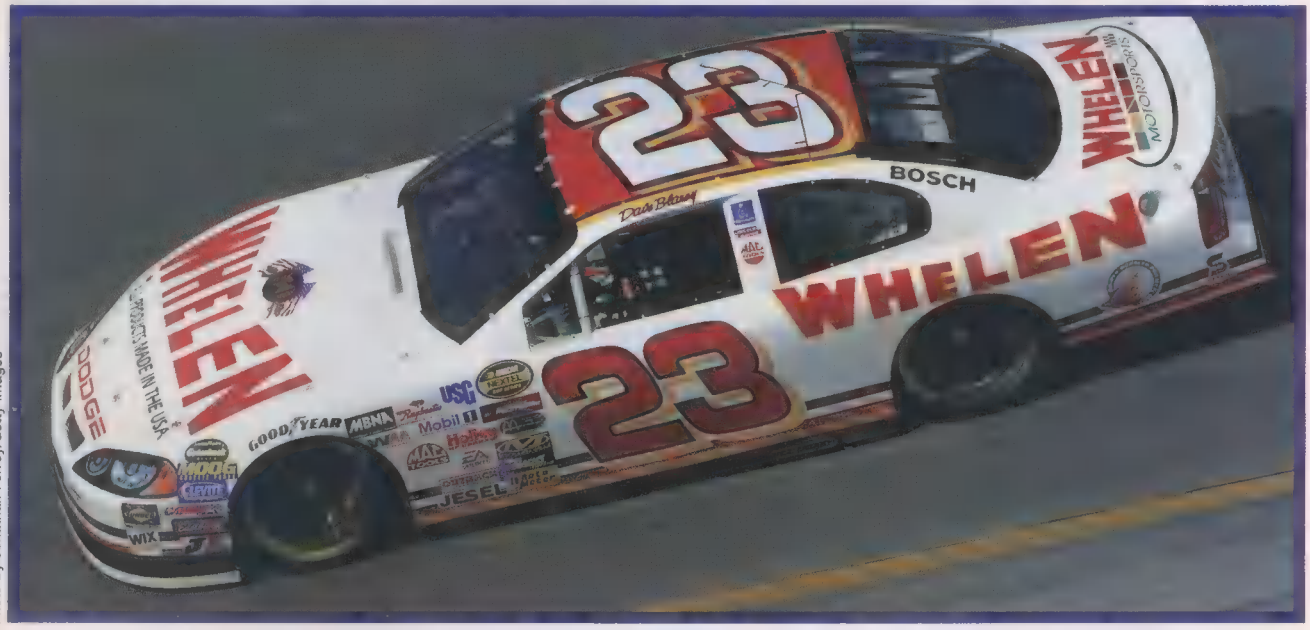


Photo By Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images

2004 Finish	38
Points	1,347
Winnings	$1,461,640
Wins	0
Top 5	0
Top 10	0
Poles	0

This car is really the America Online #30, which Jeff Burton (among others) drove last year before being moved over to the Cingular Wireless #31 for the coming season. The number was changed because the sponsor, Jack Daniel's, likes the number 07. Blaney is the driver partly because he did a stint in the AOL car, but mostly because he's a good, steady driver, who treats his equipment well.

Here's the funny part. If you're a NASCAR historian, you know the sport was partially created by guys who got together to race the cars that they used for hauling moonshine. Now it appears we've gone full circle from cars driven by moonshine runners to cars with big old logos of legal alcohol on their sides. But wait, there's more. Did you know that Richard Childress also owns a winery in the Carolinas? (Man, we can't wait to go to one of his media functions!) See what kind of fun we can all have when NASCAR allows hard liquor to be a sponsor?

Anyway, this somewhat new team should do well. Blaney, despite his 38th-place finish last year, has impressive credentials. He's the only Cup driver to make it there via the rough-and-tumble world of Outlaw Sprint Car racing, and that's a tough stretch. This will be the best equipment Blaney's had, and RCR is known for getting the most out of what they have. All that remains is to get the boys together and get some seat time for everyone to jell and begin working as a team.

Consistency	3
Equipment	4
Pit Crew	3
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	3



Photo By Craig Jones/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

KYLE BUSCH #5

23

Kelloggs/Got Milk? Chevy Monte Carlo
Hendrick Motorsports



Photo By Darrell Ingham/Getty Images

2004 Finish	52
Points	345
Winnings	$394,489
Wins	0
Top 5	0
Top 10	0
Poles	0

Busch, an official rookie candidate and the newest member of the Hendrick five-car Cup effort, runs in the #5 car, while its former driver, Terry Labonte, races a limited schedule in the #44.

Busch did his schooling on the highly popular ABC plan. That's where a team develops a driver by entering him in selected (A) ARCA RE/MAX Series races, (B) Busch Grand National, and (C) Nextel Cup to broaden his horizons and give him a taste of the tracks and cars he'll eventually end up on. Does this system actually work? Ever hear of a guy named Ryan Newman?

There's a tremendous amount of potential as a Hendrick team member, since Jimmie Johnson raised the bar for rookie performance with his fifth-place finish in 2002. That can work for or against Busch, but it will more than likely work for him. Think of the talent he can go to for input: Johnson, Gordon, Labonte, and even Brian Vickers. If Busch keeps an open mind and makes it his priority to do nothing but learn, he can go far.

Let's watch this guy.

Consistency	3
Equipment	5
Pit Crew	4
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	3

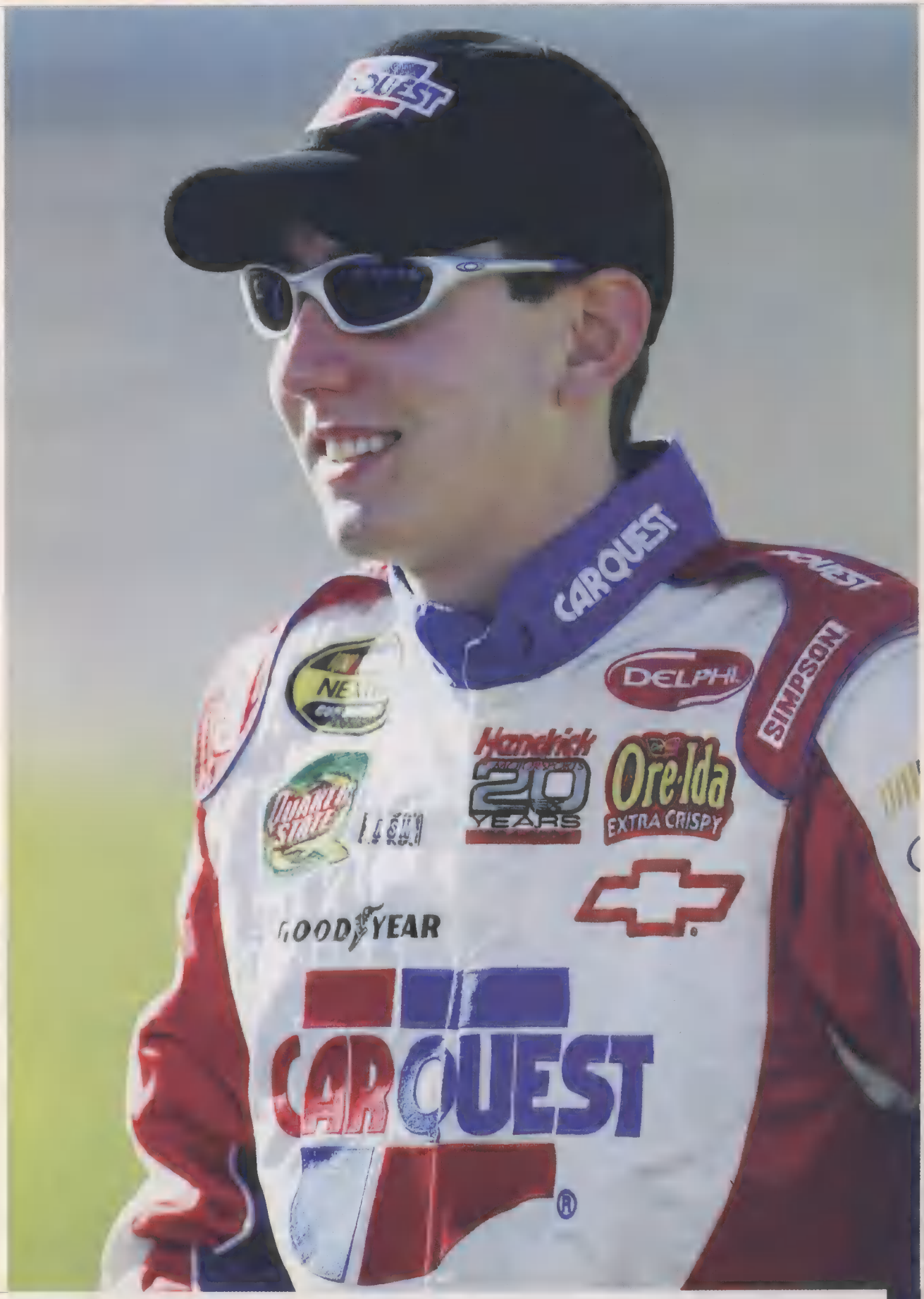


Photo By Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

24

ELLIOTT SADLER #38

M&M Candy Ford Taurus

Robert Yates Racing

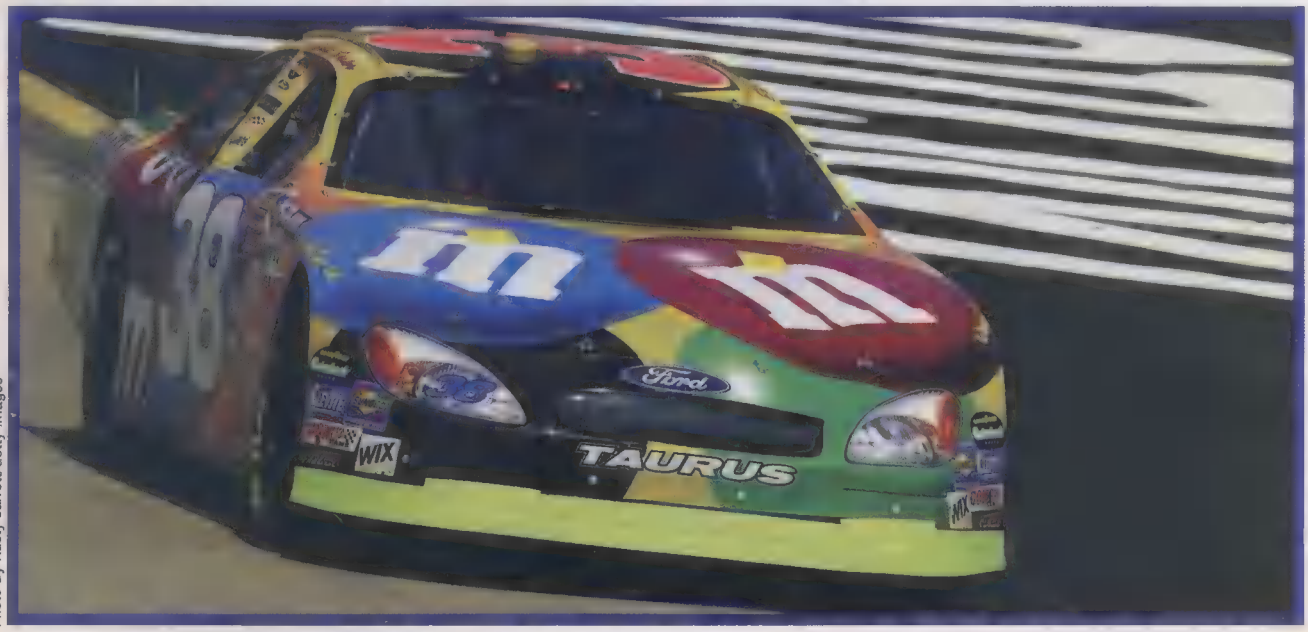


Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

2004 Finish	9
Points	6,024
Winnings	$5,158,360
Wins	2
Top 5	8
Top 10	14
Poles	0

Last year was bittersweet for Sadler (and we're not making a pun about candy). On one hand, he finally got it together and became the hot shoe he was hired to be. He even made it into the Chase before he and Jeremy Mayfield were quickly "bad-lucked" out of contention. On the other hand, his rise and fall in the Chase clearly illustrates how having one or two bad days can quickly lead to having a bad year. While he did manage to win twice and get into the Chase, he still didn't show well when you put the results on a spreadsheet. The question is, does the trouble lie with Sadler or within the Yates team? One look at the #88 car and it looks like this team is still struggling.

When one pulls back and looks at the bigger picture, the results are not due to a lack of effort. In fact, Yates and Roush, formerly *serious* competitors against each other, have joined forces to speed up the progress of the new Ford heads. Sadler has been doing this long enough to know how to win and how to race for points. He knows how to set up a car with his crew chief and knows what to do with it regardless of how it's working that day. But, like all the Roush and the Yates cars, they just don't seem to have enough to get to the top and stay there.

Will the Yates and Roush cars find what they need in time to be a leader once again? That seems to be the running question in both camps.

Consistency	2
Equipment	3
Pit Crew	3
Team Management	5
Come From Behind	3

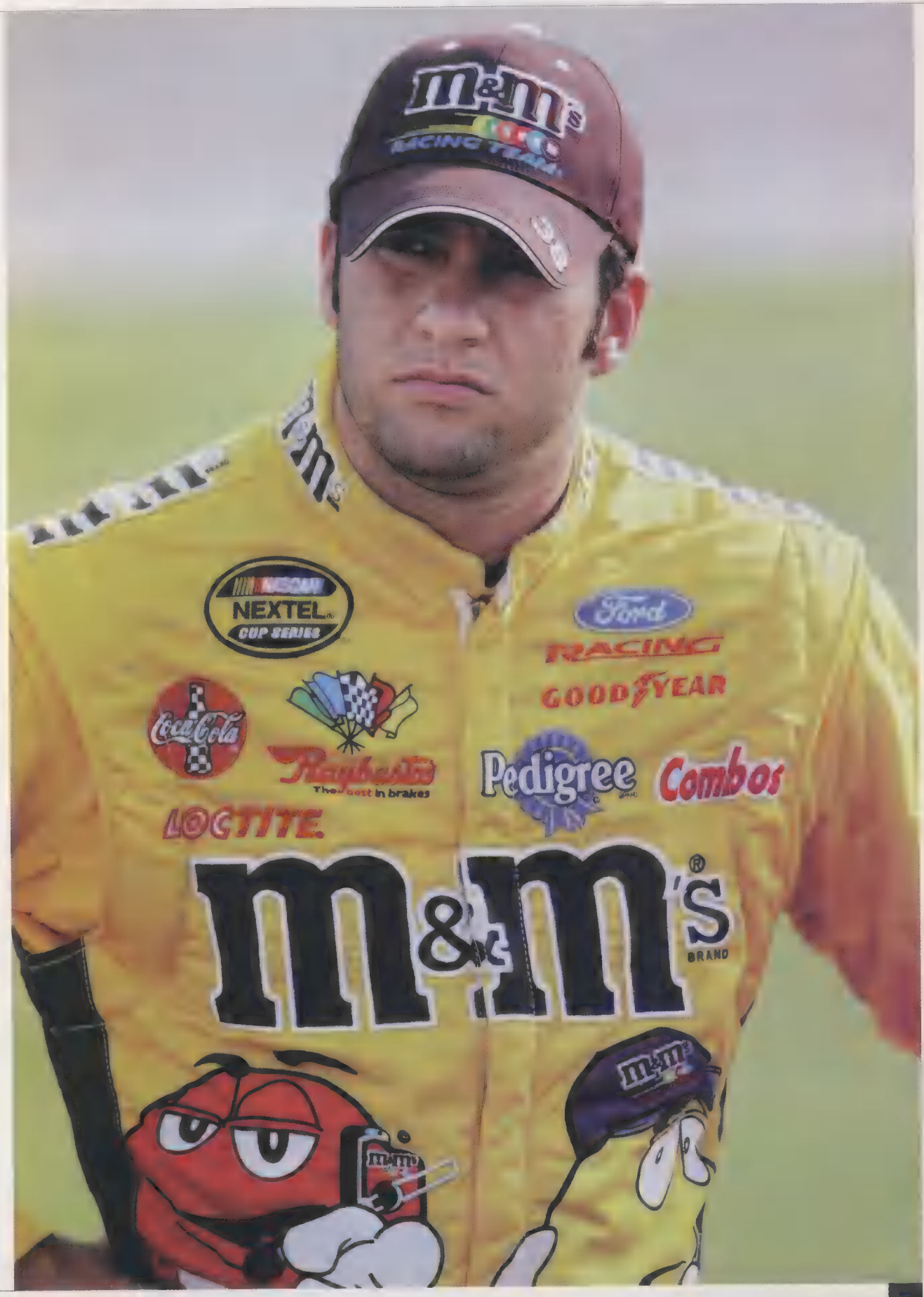


Photo By Chris Stanford/Getty Images

Last Lap 2005 FORECAST

25

CASEY MEARS #41

Target Dodge Charger

Chip Ganassi With Felix Sabates

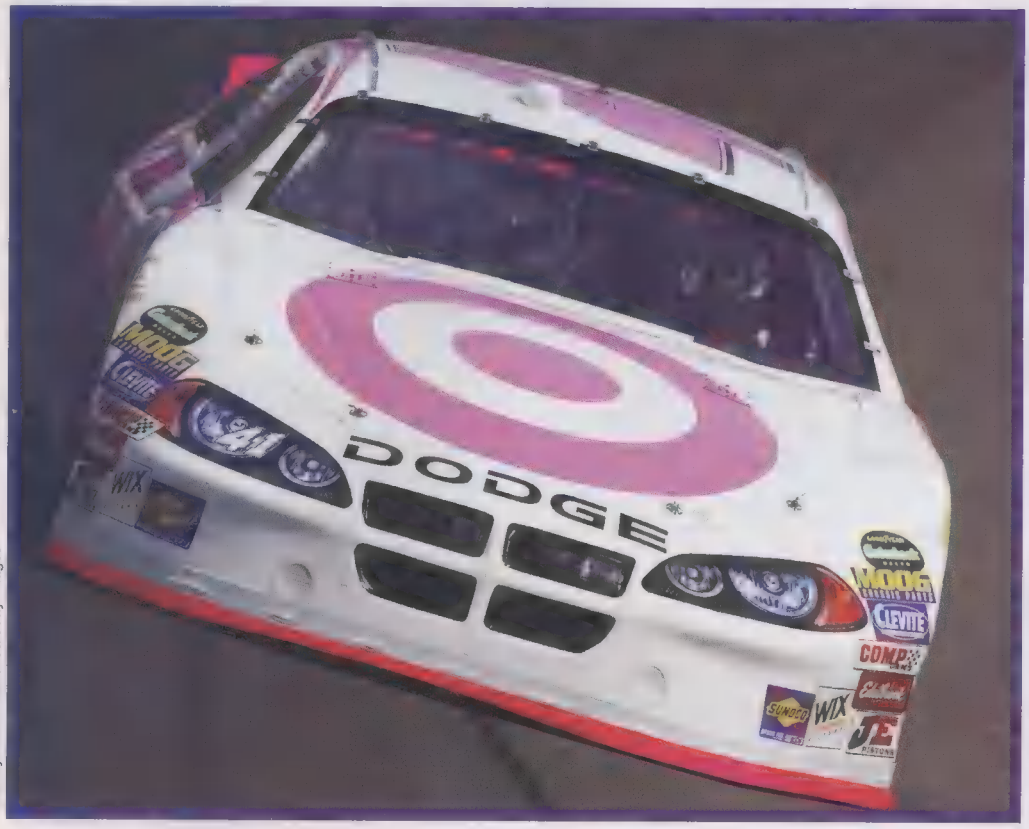


Photo By Gavin Lawrence/Getty Images

2004 Finish	22
Points	3,690
Winnings	$3,250,320
Wins	0
Top 5	1
Top 10	9
Poles	2

We thought long and hard about who would be our last guy on the list and chose Mears over a few newcomers who will undoubtedly make a splash this year. But it might still be a risk. That's because Casey has yet to develop the needed consistency to be a major player. We're just playing the odds to draw the conclusion he'll do exactly that this year. He'll need to, or he may find himself looking for a job.

When you're part of a three-car team, *someone* has to be the last guy, just like someone has to be first. Mears came into his Ganassi deal on the catch-up plan with established winners Sterling Marlin and Jamie McMurray as his new teammates. If that's not intimidating enough, they have routinely shown him the way over his few years at Ganassi's. And with a major player like Ganassi and the year he's had, it does make you wonder whether or not he has Mears on the short leash.

Mears has a bunch of things going for him, such as the cars being mostly the same and the tracks being more familiar. There are no major rules changes, so basically, he has nothing new to learn. He's seen the show before and he should now be able to sing along. It's his time to start getting consistent, maybe sticking his nose into a few heated battles for the lead, and maybe even threatening to win a time or two. It's a hunch, but we think he is going to do it this year.

Consistency	2
Equipment	3
Pit Crew	3
Team Management	4
Come From Behind	2

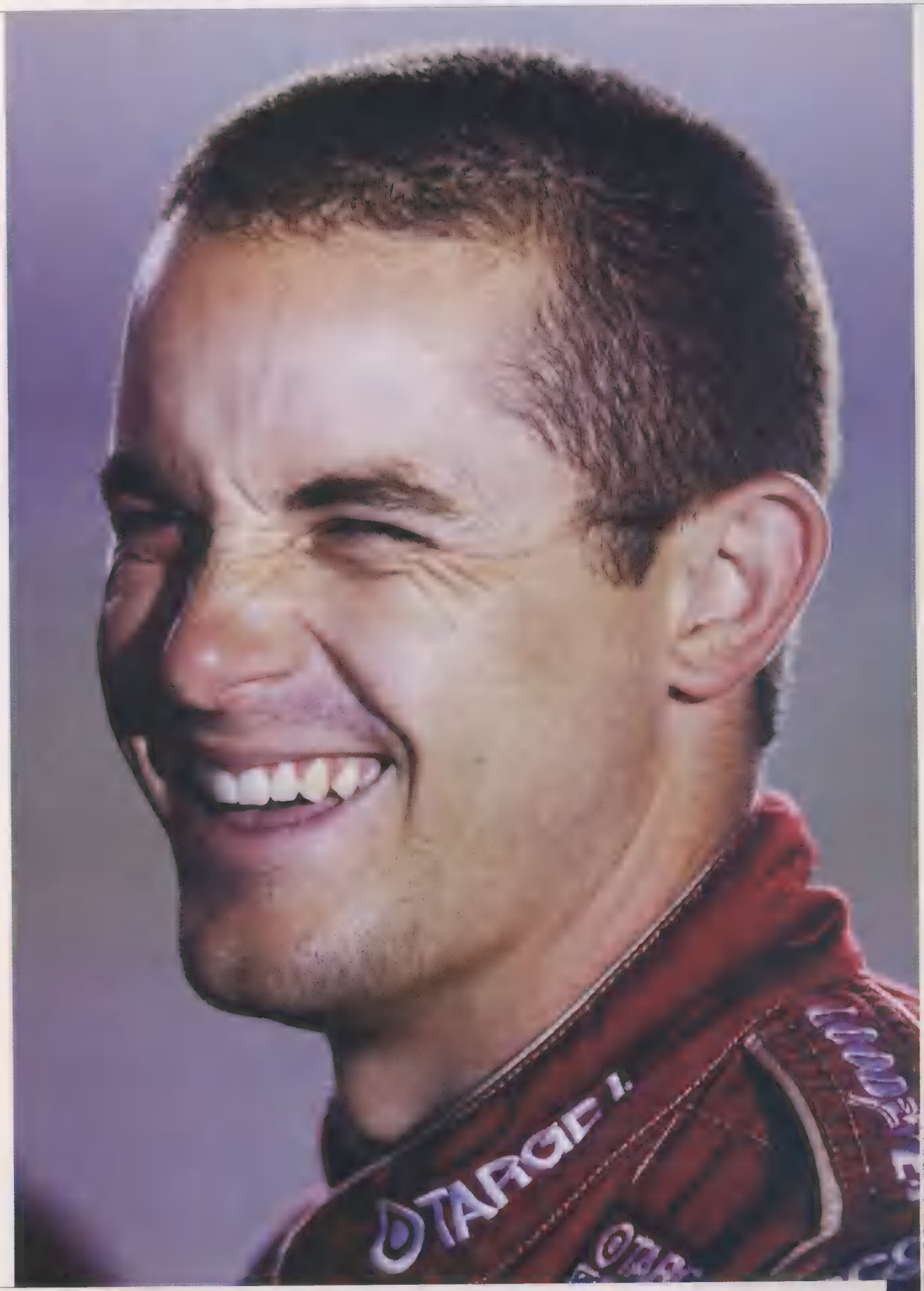
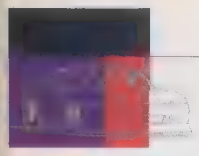


Photo by Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images



KURT BUSCH

"It's Not Like Any Other Championship In The World"

COMING INTO THE final race of the 2004 season, the Ford 400 at Homestead-Miami Speedway, Kurt Busch had a pretty good idea of what he had to do to protect his 18-point Nextel Cup lead. If he could just stay focused and consistent, as he had done throughout the season and into the Chase for the Nextel Cup, the 26-year-old's name would be listed among those men he had grown up idolizing.

Getting the pole position for the first time in two years, while his nearest rival, Jimmie Johnson, was relegated to a provisional 39th spot, was as good a start as he could have hoped for. But fate would deal Busch a cruel blow midway through the race that nearly—quite literally—saw the wheels come off in his quest for the championship.

On lap 92, Busch noticed a vibration on the right front and decided to pit. The wheel broke off the spindle as he entered the pits and he came within inches of crashing. Forced to resume the race in the 28th position of the lead lap, Busch put his newfound maturity on display. He patiently worked his way up and managed a fifth-place finish, good enough for an eight-point victory over Johnson. When it came time to accept the Cup, Busch was grateful—and very humble.

"We feel like we dodged a huge, huge, devastating proposition," he said, "that could have taken us out of the championship, and we pulled through."

Kurt Busch was born on August 4, 1978, in Las Vegas, Nevada—a place that, at the time, didn't have a direct link to NASCAR. In 1994, he won the Legends Cars rookie title, and then the championship a year later. In 1996, he captured the Hobby Stock championship at Las Vegas Speedway Park, attracting the attention of owners in NASCAR's Touring Series. In 1998, he won the Rookie of the Year in the NASCAR Southwest Touring Series and the title in 1999. That same year, he won a Roush Racing "Gong Show" audition, earning a ride in a Roush truck in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series.

In 2000, Busch's first year of Craftsman Trucks, he won four races, finishing second in the final point standings and earning Rookie of the Year honors. Based on how quickly he adapted to new cars, Roush put Busch directly into the Winston Cup Series, forgoing Busch Grand National. Busch finished runner-up for the Rookie title, and Roush was so impressed that he paired Busch with crew chief Jimmy Fennig, whose resume includes victories with Mark Martin and Bobby Allison.

In 2001, Busch won his first-ever Cup Bud Pole at Darlington and finished the year with six top-10s. During 2002 and 2003, Busch earned eight victories, including three at Bristol, one of NASCAR's toughest tracks. He finished third in the championship standings in 2002 and was 11th in 2003.

There was trouble along the way, though. Citing on- and off-track antics, NASCAR came down hard on Busch, and the wakeup call had a profound effect on his attitude. By 2004, his desire to run through everyone in his path was gone. For the season, he had three wins, 10 top-fives, and 21 top-10s. By comparison, Johnson had twice as many top-fives. Busch entered the Chase in seventh position, but was the only driver to collect bonus points in nine of the 10 Chase races, finishing with 55 bonus points over the 10-race span.

When Busch held this Q&A with the media shortly after being awarded the Nextel Cup, it didn't seem as if the reality had quite sunk in. But some time after coming to New York for a week of festivities that culminated with the award presentations at the Waldorf-Astoria, he had learned to relish the moment.

"On Tuesday, I couldn't believe everything that was happening—the TV shows, the dinners, the fans," he told the Associated Press. "I didn't think it would ever end. Now, I don't want it to end. It's just been amazing."



Photo By Chris Trotman/Getty Images For NASCAR



Photos By Robert Laberge/Getty Images



After the front right wheel came off Busch's car midway through the Ford 400 (left), his chances of winning the Nextel Cup looked bleak, but Kurt and Co. were able to put things back together and finish well enough—fifth—to be in the bubbly (below).

Q: You went to your dad when you were 14 years old and said you wanted to race. He said to keep your grades up and he would give you his car. Can you address the long road to where you're at now at the age of 26?

A: One might argue that it hasn't been a long road. I've been very fortunate to slide into different rides to be able to meet the right people and sponsors, car owners, crew chiefs, and to be able to do this in such a short time frame, it's mind-boggling to me. I've had so many things fall into place in my life that I'm very fortunate for. To be able to work for such a caliber team at such a young age was overwhelming to me. And all I knew at that level was to go to the front, race as hard as I can, and wrinkle fenders along the way. That's how I thought I was supposed to race.

Q: That's not where you're at now.

A: That was the wrong mindset. When I raced with Jimmy Fennig my second year, he gave me great cars that would lead races and run up front. Now I'm an unpolished rookie or second-year driver that has equipment. Look out. I ran over people again. It took some time for me to understand the bigger picture and to know there was no real level higher than this, and there never will be in my life.

Q: So it was a matter of maturing on the job?

A: I'm fully committed to NASCAR and the Nextel Cup racing circuit. Just to be able to understand the bigger ethic and bigger picture about racing at this level is one thing that I misunderstood the first couple of years, and now I've been able to put that in grasp and to learn from Jimmy Fennig, to learn from Jack Roush. And, of course, my father was always there. He was the first one that I would go to after a race when I got home and ask him questions about what I did wrong and what I can do better. And he's really helped me along to this point.

Q: You didn't come up on the southern bullrings or even the Busch Series. How is your background affecting the way you are as a race car driver?

A: Well, I believe it was the rise to come up from one series to the next, without spending a certain amount of time learning the bad habits of what that series had within it. Jack moved me straight into Cup with only one year, six months of truck experience.

Q: Was that too quick?

A: To go from the bullrings and the Saturday night short tracks out in Las Vegas, relatively unknown to the truck world, then completely unknown to the Cup world, every single one of my mistakes were up at this elite level. And that's one thing that I did wrong. Maybe I should have waited another year in truck. Maybe I should have done a year in Busch. But one thing that I'm able to say, and it's because I'm in this position today, that we

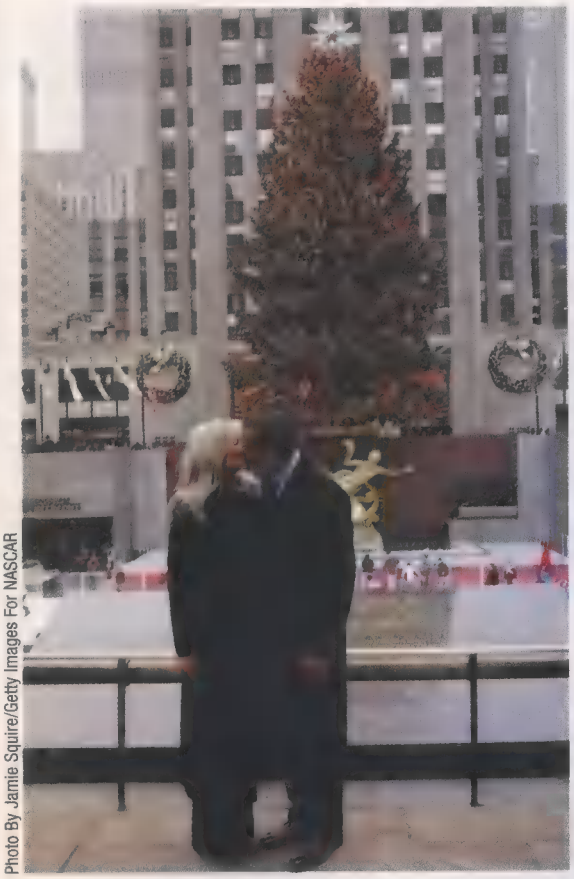


Photo By Jamie Squire/Getty Images For NASCAR

Kurt and his girlfriend, Eva Bryan, share a kiss in front of New York City's Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

continued to race hard, we continued to learn hard lessons, and the knowledge that I have about race cars has fed from my father. It translated right into Jack's frame of mind, the way that he approaches race cars and the way that he builds his teams. I was the racer at heart. That's all I wanted to do was race, and I didn't understand the bigger picture. That's where the results came quick, but the rough edges of the other things were a bit more magnified.

Q: Give us your thoughts and emotions on being a NASCAR Nextel Cup Series champion.

A: Just unbelievable. To be able to persevere, to overcome all the different obstacles, to put together a great season such as we did, with the regular season, and then with the playoffs—outstanding.

Q: What was the key to getting over those obstacles you're referring to?

A: One little slip here or there, we were able to make up for it. We started off the Chase with a win. We finished with a top five and a pole. Unbelievable the way that Jimmy Fennig executed the whole program, to give me the best race cars I could possibly drive, and to give me equipment that would give me the position like we had: a top-five finish. I was in stitches. I was just sick to my stomach the last few laps. I'd been out there forever. I hadn't had fresh water in a while.

Q: The pressure must have been enormous.

A: I felt like I had the whole world on my shoulders, every lap, but I never felt like I was alone. I had my whole team behind me and I had the fan support, and I knew that I had the equipment.

Q: So what runs through your mind, having achieved a lifelong dream?

A: So many emotions. And to be able to pull through and to finish like we did, to cap off a great season, it's an unbelievable feeling. This isn't parallel to the Super Bowl or to the World Series. This is the first championship that NASCAR put together with this new format. And to be the first Nextel Cup champion, it took so much from within, it's not like any other championship in the world.

Q: Two or three saves in the final race alone. It was almost like a summary of what your whole season has been: save after save after save.

A: It's just a scenario where I've seen things go wrong and tried to understand what I need to do as a driver to communicate to the team, to be able to persevere, and to stay focused on the task at hand. Things are always magnified when you're in this position of driving for a championship. It was a full-team effort. The way that we were able to overcome all of those circumstances, there's positions and times to be lucky, there's positions and times to be able to make sure that you stay focused and put those thoughts at bay and put together the best effort.

Q: And now that it's over?

A: I'm overwhelmed. I'm completely exhausted about what these final 10 races meant. But it's a true testament to what a team has to do, to what a driver has to do, to what an owner sees as a leader, in the way you have to compete at your top level for 10 races against the 10 toughest competitors. That's what this season meant for us, because that's what the Nextel Chase for the Cup is.

Q: Tell us exactly what happened with the wheel, and on the subsequent pit stops to fix that problem.

A: It felt as if we had a loose lug nut. And when you have that type of problem, it's hard to distinguish what exactly is wrong. Is it the wheel spacer that got





Photos By Chris Trotman/Getty Images For NASCAR

In a "race" on the streets of New York City, we'd give the Manhattan cabbies a clear edge over these amateurs (top left). Busch proudly poses with the Nextel Cup in Times Square (bottom left).

caught up in the wheel wrong? Is it that there is something loose? You don't want to take and point your finger at somebody that did the wrong job. You have to analyze it the best way that you can. And after the pit stop, I still thought that the wheel vibrated loose, and we had a flat tire due to a blister, not knowing that the center of the wheel came out. So I pointed at the front tire changer during that pit stop. He was like, "What are you talking about? Do you need something?" I'm like, "No. This is a moment in my life and your life that we're not agreeing on."

We were able to get back out on the track and not have a vibration after that. That was the first time I've ever had a wheel that came apart. The center of it was tight against the hub. The wheel came apart from the outer ring. That's something that Jimmy Fennig explained to me. We were able to learn something new today as well as finish well enough to win the first Nextel Cup championship.

Q: Jack said his heart stopped. What was your heart doing when you saw the wheel come off and almost hit the pit wall?

A: To have that feeling of knowing that the light at the end of the tunnel was very dim at that point, and then to almost run into the tire barriers, I realized I was in the wrong frame of mind. And the car wouldn't turn. I just had too much speed. When I applied the brake, the car turned to the right even further because of the way the caliper locked up so quickly. I let go of the brake, turned it as hard as I could left, missed it. In doing that, I came into pit road too hot. So my speed on entry was too fast, and the penalty was to start at the tail end of the longest line. That was that.

Q: How did you focus on getting back to racing?

A: Knowing early on that you have time to make up, to be able to pull up through the field, you're able to smile still.

Q: When you had the problem with the wheel, the slow pit stop, on the radio you sounded like you were a little tense, but you didn't flip out. Is that maybe a sign of maturity that people have been talking about with you?

A: I believe at that point in the race, it was time to either shape up or ship out, and I wanted the team to rally behind every one of themselves and to know we had no more room for mistakes. To have that circumstance of the wheel falling off, something that I've never had



Photo By Buena Vista Television via Getty Images

Regis Philbin and Kelly Ripa admire the Nextel Cup trophy, crafted for NASCAR by Tiffany and Co.

before, to have the miscommunication on what we were going to do as far as our pit stop, it was still early enough in the race. We got to this point because we're a team, and we were going to win this thing or lose this thing because we were a team. There wasn't going to be any finger-pointing. I would take all responsibility because the media would have been on my shoulders afterward.

Q: When it was all over and they handed you the trophy. It seems like it took you a few minutes to really grasp everything. Is that the point when it really hit you that you had won?

A: Immediately the emotions overtook anything that I did all day. When I got to the point of hoisting the trophy, the first Nextel Cup, it meant so much to me, it meant so much to NASCAR, and I know that it meant a tremendous amount to Nextel.

Q: Kurt, could you describe to us what is it about your personality that you think you're going to be able to bring to the championship?

A: This is a new look and a new face for NASCAR. I'm a driver that likes to go back to tradition, and to go to the heritage of our sport. I hope I'm able to link the two together to create an identity of new fans as well as keep the old fans interested in what we've done as a new format.

To be a leader in what we can do with Nextel, the possibilities are endless. And I am more ambitious and willing to do anything for them to help create what they want out of this program. To be a champion, the first of Nextel, the second in a row for Jack Roush, the first for Jimmy Fennig, and the first for the '97 Sharpie Irwin racing team, there are so many people that I represent, that any time I speak or any time I show up for any type of appearance, there will be people affected. And, hopefully, people will be turned on to our sport more so than what they were before, as well as follow our team in more depth.

Q: Kurt, you had a pretty charged reaction during driver introductions. Do you think you have won some fans?

A: That's what's great about our sport. The fans are entitled to root and pull against anybody they want to. And to be in a situation such as mine, the underdog, somebody that came up in this new format, new system, to be able to come up to the top—maybe too quickly—through my career, as well, relatively unknown, just a different look from the West Coast, to race too hard too early, wrinkle those fenders, and to crumble the spirits of some of those fans, this is definitely a bullet point in my career that will help some of them realize that I'm not such a bad guy.



Photo By Chris Trotman/Getty Images For NASCAR

A somber champion visits the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero. Kurt is very well aware of the importance of putting forth a good image for NASCAR, his sponsors, Nextel, and, of course, himself.



NO SHORTCUTS

NASCAR Rookie J.J. Yeley Has Worked Hard For A Chance To Prove Himself

By Joe Santoliquito

Jack and Judy Yeley might be considered bad parents today for what they used to do to their young son, J.J. The Yeleys would barnstorm through small Midwestern towns on the midget-car circuit, each time leaving five-year-old J.J. alone on his own to romp through the grandstands with his friends, carrying enough pocket change for snacks.

By race time, the playing was over, and J.J. would park himself next to a fan and soak everything up, watching his father's blue No. 11 spew out dirt around the track. J.J. never got lost. His parents always knew where to find him, and on occasions when a concerned parent would ask him where his mom and dad were, J.J. would point and reply, "That's my dad in that blue No. 11 racing around the track."

After a few months, the people who'd been seeing J.J. week after week began recognizing him and stopped asking who he was. J.J. is counting on that same familiarity this 2005 season, when the NASCAR world recognizes his face and stops asking: *Who is J.J. Yeley*?

Yeley is trying to make the same transition from the open-wheel ranks of USAC to NASCAR as Yeley's Joe Gibbs Racing (JGR) teammate Tony Stewart.

Yeley finished last season competing in full-bodied stock cars for the first time, completing an ABC developmental schedule of ARCA, NASCAR Busch Series, and NASCAR Nextel Cup Series races. He finished 30th in the Busch Series. Racing a limited schedule that featured only 17 starts, Yeley placed among the top 10 four times and his 1,859 points was fourth overall among Busch Series rookies. He took home $355,145, and his best finish was sixth, in the Mr. Goodcents 300 at Kansas Speedway on October 9.

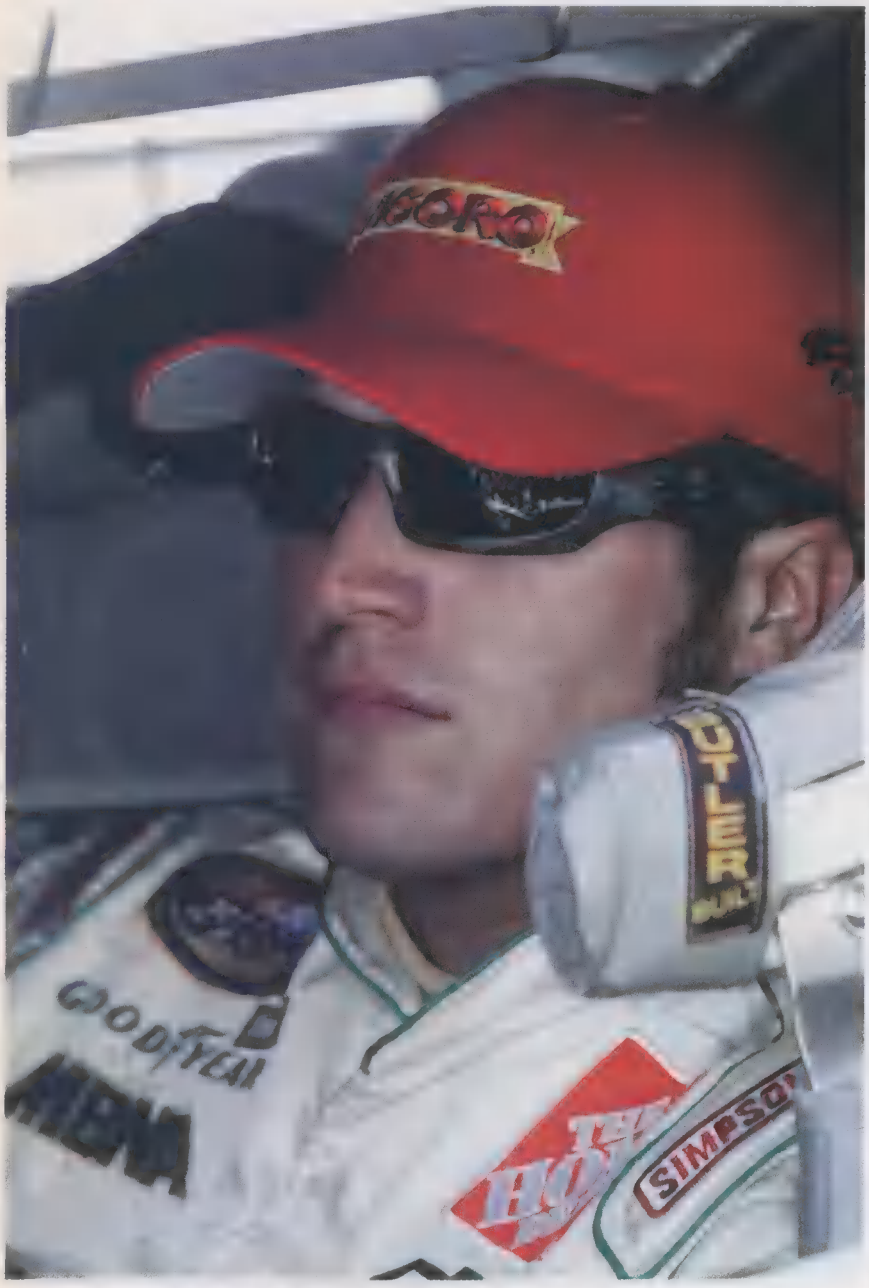
But Yeley's history suggests greater success will come soon—maybe very soon.

In 2003, Yeley, 28, became only the second driver in history to earn USAC's Triple Crown by winning the National Midget, Sprint, and Silver Crown championships in a single season. The only other driver to complete that trifecta was 2002 Winston Cup champion Stewart, who since being with JGR has earned 17 wins and seven poles.

Yeley has racing in his blood. It's something he just couldn't help. His parents groomed him to run. Yeley took accelerated courses to graduate high school in three years. His bloodlines couldn't be better. His father, "Cactus Jack," was a seven-time Arizona Midget Racing Association champion and two-time World of Outlaws Midget champion. Jack would take J.J. along everywhere in their family trailer. J.J.'s lessons would come from watching—by himself.

"I was running so much, we just didn't have the time to always be with


SIMPSON
NASCAR BUSCH SERIES
SIMPSON
GOODYEAR
MBNA
VIGORO
VIGORO
D.J. Yeley



Yeley is looking forward to the 2005 season as his breakout year. J.J. has been successful at every level of racing, and he's been yearning for this opportunity for years.

him, so I guess we were bad parents," Jack Yeley joked. "The world was a better place back then. You can't do that anymore. We raced all over the country and we weren't home that much. We'd sleep in the van, after pulling into a rest stop. J.J. made a lot of friends.

"One time, he came down to the track, I think it was Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, some place like that. He came down with a grandfatherly looking guy who must have been 60, 70 years old. It was really funny that J.J. took up with that guy. J.J. didn't play around that much when the races went on. He learned a lot. I taught him a lot, like responsibility, and taking care of yourself."

Then the 58-year-old Yeley paused, and laughed again. "We'd probably get locked up today, if anyone left their boy out there alone like that."

J.J. is dealing with almost a completely different way of racing than what he was used to as an open-wheel driver. A sprint car weighs roughly 1,200 pounds and has 830 horsepower. A stock car weighs 3,400 pounds, with over 800 horsepower. At the sprint-car level, Yeley's superior driving skills could always compensate if the car wasn't exactly right. That isn't the case with stock cars. If a stock car is slightly off, your whole program could be scrambled.

"J.J. was a sprint-car champion and the biggest difference is the horsepower-to-weight ratio," said Mike Massaro, ESPN's *SportsCenter* reporter for NASCAR. "The NASCAR is heavier and that obviously takes a lot of getting used to. The races are much shorter on the sprint-car level, and J.J. has to get used to the endurance-format of a Busch Series race. Those sprint-car races are pretty intense, though. The sprint-car races take patience because if you do make one mistake in a sprint car, it could be a lot more costly.

"When you get to the NASCAR level, the car is a bigger part of the equation than the driver is on certain tracks. But the target moves and the transition is greater from track to track. Some tracks, it's the car, other tracks



Photo By Sherryl Creekmore/NASCAR

NASCAR Rookie of the Year Kasey Kahne made a successful transition from open-wheel racing to stock cars in 2004. Yeley is trying to do the same, after winning USAC's Triple Crown in 2003.

it's the driver that has the most influence on winning a race."

J.J. half-jokingly says that driving in the Busch Series in '04 was like learning how to drive again.

"The attitude of the car is so much different; you can race an open-wheel with your elbows out and the wheels off, and still be able to take that car and win with it," J.J. said. "In a stock car, that's going to be close to impossible to win if it's not handling well. The stock car is bigger and slower reacting than an open-wheel car. I'm so used to being on the gas. In a stock car, I'm going to want to push up the racetrack. That's the biggest thing I'm always reminding myself, to always be able to drive the car. The car is more in control of the driver."

But Massaro points to the number of highly successful NASCAR drivers who emerged from the open-wheel and sprint-car ranks, like Stewart, Ryan Newman, and Jeff Gordon.

"Look what you have out there now," Massaro said. "It's a transition that absolutely can be made and has been made successfully. It seems open-wheel racing is a good place to build a repertoire of skills. Kasey Kahne, this year's rookie of the year, came from the open-wheel ranks. Owners are looking at sprint-car racing as a breeding ground for talent."

Talent was never a question when it comes to Yeley. J.J. started driving quarter-midgets (similar to go-carts) when he was 10, which is considered a late start for racers (they generally begin running when they are five or six). By the time Yeley was 14, he was racing—and winning—in full-sized midgets.

"My dad pushed me very hard when I was young, and my parents taught me the value of sportsmanship, but I had to finish every week in order to go and race the next week," J.J. said. "I always work on my own equipment, I always will. We didn't have a lot when I was growing up. That teaches you better value about the race cars. It gives you a better understanding of what's working; you just learn to take care of your



Photo By Rusty Jarrett/Getty Images

Yeley said driving in the Busch Series was like learning how to race competitively all over again. The horsepower-to-weight ratio was one of the biggest obstacles he had to overcome.

equipment. You understand what something costs."

Beyond the sprints and midgets, Yeley's been successful, but those triumphs have come in small doses. In 1998, Yeley ran a brief stint in IRL and took ninth in a 33-car field at the 82nd Indianapolis 500. During qualifying, Yeley achieved the 13th best time with an average speed of 218.044 mph, which made him the fastest qualifying rookie. Yeley was racing for a small satellite team associated with John Menard. But the opportunity to succeed fell through when the team could not generate enough sponsorship to stay afloat.

The following year, Yeley was back racing sprints and midgets. J.J. took it as a demotion—and it hit him hard.

"That feeling of making it up a level and getting knocked back down made me think I just wasn't taking it seriously enough," Yeley said. "It made me more humble. In racing, you just don't fall down one step; you fall down two or three steps. You always have to be on the ball. I was moderately successful in those races, and no one called me and I couldn't get any opportunities. In order to get into the stock cars, you need the insiders. Getting that opportunity was difficult."

In 2001, Yeley sat by the phone, waiting and wondering if he would ever get the call to take the ultimate step up the racing rung—NASCAR. He was thinking maybe he was approaching the borderline age of a ripe 25. He knew the hard work he had put into his craft. He knew the dedication and sacrifices that were made. He just lacked the opportunity.

"It was frustrating," Yeley recalled. "I'm too competitive, a little fish in the ocean racing against the best race car drivers around, and I believe that's NASCAR. I was calling owners and no one was calling back. You find there are those drivers who have connections, and there are drivers who don't and who have still gotten there. If you're going to get to NASCAR, you should have busted your butt and earned your way there. With me, I came up the old-fashioned way,



Photo By Robert Laberge/Getty Images

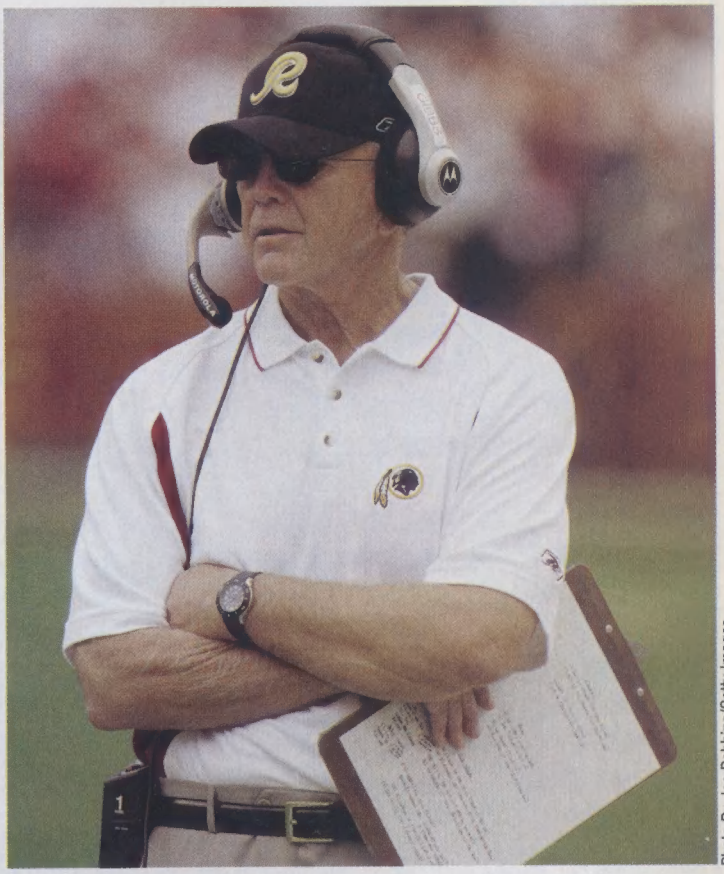


Photo By Joe Robbins/Getty Images

It was 2002 Winston Cup champion Tony Stewart (above left) who suggested to Joe Gibbs (above right) that JGR take a good look at Yeley. In January 2004, J.J. signed a deal with JGR and J.J.'s goal of competing at NASCAR was complete. Now it's time to win.

racing midgets, working my way up the circuits."

By '03, Yeley was approached with a few Craftsman Truck Series opportunities and some Busch Series teams, but his real change didn't emerge until Stewart—a driver cut from the same cloth as Yeley—went to Joe Gibbs Racing, urging them to take a look at this kid tearing up the USAC tour. Late in '03, Joe Gibbs, the Hall of Fame NFL coach, and his son, J.D., invited Yeley down to their Huntersville, North Carolina, headquarters and shop.

"It was a great compliment to have someone like Tony Stewart come to Gibbs and ask them to approach me," said Yeley.

When he got to Huntersville, Yeley was impressed by the fact that many people had been working in the shop for years. "You notice that all of the employees working for the team enjoy where they are, because there is a high turnaround in most shops," Yeley said. "I liked that. It says they have happy people working for them, and they work for a good company."

Yeley signed with JGR in January 2004.

If and when Yeley makes it into the NASCAR winner's circle, he'll owe his parents a little something. Back when J.J. was racing midgets and money was hard to come by, Judy Yeley gave up $14,000 she had socked away for a new car to buy J.J. a new engine for one of his midget racers.

"We kept that from J.J. at the time," Jack Yeley said. "If he knew where that money came from, he wouldn't have liked it. But Judy knew J.J. needed that engine. One day, when J.J. becomes rich and famous, he has to buy his mother a new car."

Leaving Mom with a new car in front of a racetrack is a nice tradeoff, instead of pocket change for snacks. Seems like Mom and Dad had the right idea all along.



2005 Nextel Cup Schedule

Date	Race	Venue	2004 Winner
02/20/05	Daytona 500	Daytona Int'l Speedway	Dale Earnhardt Jr.
02/27/05	Auto Club 500	California Speedway	Jeff Gordon
03/13/05	UAW-Daimler Chrysler 400	Las Vegas Motor Speedway	Matt Kenseth
03/20/05	Golden Corral 500	Atlanta Motor Speedway	Dale Earnhardt Jr.
04/03/05	Food City 500	Bristol Motor Speedway	Kurt Busch
04/10/05	Advance Auto Parts 500	Martinsville Speedway	Rusty Wallace
04/17/05	Samsung/Radio Shack 500	Texas Motor Speedway	Elliott Sadler
04/23/05	Arizona 500	Phoenix Int'l Raceway	Rusty Wallace
05/01/05	Aaron's 499	Talladega Superspeedway	Jeff Gordon
05/07/05	Carolina Dodge Dealers 500	Darlington Raceway	Jimmie Johnson
05/14/05	Chevy American Revolution 400	Richmond Int'l Raceway	Dale Earnhardt Jr.
05/29/05	Coca-Cola 600	Lowe's Motor Speedway	Jimmie Johnson
06/05/05	MBNA America 400	Dover Int'l Speedway	Mark Martin
06/12/05	Pocono 500	Pocono Raceway	Jimmie Johnson
06/19/05	DHL 400	Michigan Int'l Speedway	Ryan Newman
06/26/05	Dodge/Save Mart 350	Infineon Raceway	Jeff Gordon
07/02/05	Pepsi 400	Daytona Int'l Speedway	Jeff Gordon
07/10/05	Tropicana 400	Chicagoland Speedway	Tony Stewart
07/17/05	Siemens 300	New Hampshire Int'l Speedway	Kurt Busch
07/24/05	Pennsylvania 500	Pocono Raceway	Jimmie Johnson
08/07/05	Brickyard 400	Indianapolis Motor Speedway	Jeff Gordon
08/14/05	Sirius at the Glen	Watkins Glen International	Tony Stewart
08/21/05	GFS Marketplace 400	Michigan Int'l Speedway	Greg Biffle
08/27/05	Sharpie 500	Bristol Motor Speedway	Dale Earnhardt Jr.
09/04/05	Pop Secret 500	California Speedway	Elliott Sadler
09/10/05	Chevrolet Rock and Roll 400	Richmond Int'l Raceway	Jeremy Mayfield
09/18/05	Sylvania 300	New Hampshire Int'l Speedway	Kurt Busch
09/25/05	MBNA America 400	Dover Int'l Speedway	Ryan Newman
10/02/05	EA Sports 500	Talladega Superspeedway	Dale Earnhardt Jr.
10/09/05	Banquet 400 by ConAgra Foods	Kansas Speedway	Joe Nemechek
10/15/05	UAW-GM Quality 500	Lowe's Motor Speedway	Jimmie Johnson
10/23/05	Subway 500	Martinsville Speedway	Jimmie Johnson
10/30/05	Bass Pro Shops MBNA 500	Atlanta Motor Speedway	Jimmie Johnson
11/06/05	Dickies 500	Texas Motor Speedway	Jimmie Johnson
11/13/05	Checker Auto Parts 500	Phoenix Int'l Raceway	Dale Earnhardt Jr.
11/20/05	Ford 400	Homestead-Miami Speedway	Greg Biffle

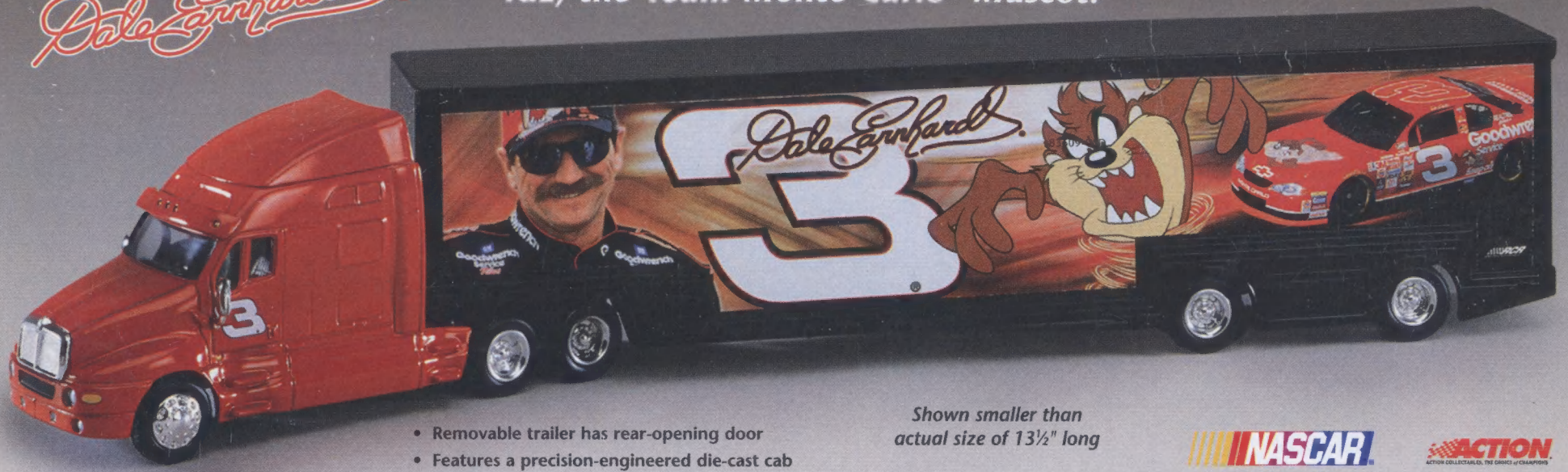


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